

The Pumpkin Patch



The Pumpkin Patch

Book 5 of *A Well-Lived Life 3*

by Michael Loucks

Copyright © 2015-2023 Michael P. Loucks

First publication date: TBD

First revision publication date: TBD

Second revision publication date: TBD

You may contact the author at: author@michaelloucks.com
<https://a-well-lived-life.com/>

Other Books In This Series

A Well-Lived Life, Series 1

Book 1 - Birgit

Book 2 - Jennifer

Book 3 - Pia

Book 4 - Bethany

Book 5 - Stephanie

Book 6 - Kara I

Book 7 - Kara II

Book 8 - Stephie

Book 9 - Anala

Book 10 - The Wife

A Well-Lived Life, Series 2

Book 1 - Bethany

Book 2 - Stephie

Book 3 - Jessica

Book 4 - Elyse

Book 5 - Michelle

Book 6 - Samantha

Book 7 - Sakurako

Book 8 - NIKA

Book 9 - Kami

Book 10 - Bridget

A Well-Lived Life Series 3

Book 1 - Suzanne

Book 2 - The Inner Circle

Book 3 - A New World

Book 4 - Coming of Age

Book 5 - The Pumpkin Patch (*)

* Work in Progress

+ Available exclusively on Patreon <https://www.patreon.com/MichaelLoucks>

Other Books by Michael Loucks

Good Medicine

Freshman Year

Sophomore Year

Junior Year

Senior Year

Medical School I

Medical School II

Medical School III

Medical School IV

Climbing the Ladder

Book 01 - The First Rung ()*

From the Files of Doctor Fran Mercer (+)*

A Sailor's Diary

Book 1 - The War Years (+)*

* Work in Progress

+ Available exclusively on Patreon <https://www.patreon.com/MichaelLoucks>

For Birgit

I. A Pleasurable Night All Around.....	1
II. Swedish Friends, Russian Friends, and Ancient History.....	29
III. You Impudent Whelp.....	61
IV. Age of Frustration.....	93
V. Libidos Unleashed.....	127
VI. Getting Back Into The Swing Of Things.....	159
VII. YOU BASTARD!.....	191
VIII. Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater.....	219
IX. I'm Happy For You.....	247
X. Dangerous.....	277
XI. Time For the Next Stage of my Life.....	307
XII. There Are Some Things a Dad Just Doesn't Need to Know!.....	335
XIII. Limits.....	365
XIV. I'm Tendering My Resignation.....	395
XV. And she's right!.....	425
XVI. A First Takeoff.....	459
XVII. Necessary Changes.....	491
XVIII. Pumpkin Has a New Hobby.....	525
XIX. Not the Weakest of the Herd!.....	559
XX. A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words.....	593
XXI. The Return of the Well-Oiled Machine.....	625
XXII. I Have News.....	659
XXIII. You're An Odd Duck!.....	687
XXIV. A Bluff?.....	719
XXV. Model Attitude.....	747
XXVI. Compromise.....	777
XXVII. A New Approach to Life.....	809
XXVIII. Clothing Optional.....	839
XXIX. «Uphetsad».....	869
XXX. Delay of Game(s).....	897
XXXI. Talented Tongues.....	925
XXXII. I Am Going To Shoot Your Father!.....	955

XXXIII. New York, New York.....	985
XXXIV. You're Still A Kid.....	1015
XXXV. A Great Shot.....	1045
XXXVI. Negative Encounters.....	1075
XXXVII. It's Normal For Teenagers.....	1107
XXXVIII. Kara Decides.....	1139
XXXIX. Sleeping Beauty.....	1173
XL. Talia.....	1207
XLI. A Proposition.....	1231
XLII. A Fantasy.....	1267
XLIII. One Seriously Warped Individual.....	1301
XLIV. That's...Crazy!.....	1331
XLV. Bed Her Well!.....	1359
XLVI. You're Free.....	1391
XLVII. Deal Maker.....	1423
XLVIII. Explorations and Missteps.....	1453
XLIX. Another Fine Mess.....	1481
L. Do I Look Stupid?.....	1513
LI. What Are You Doing Here?.....	1543
LII. Ups and Downs.....	1575
LIII. Truth and Reconciliation.....	1605
LIV. I'm Anti-Stupidity.....	1637
LV. You're Just No Fun, Dad!.....	1669
LVI. You're Stalling.....	1703
LVII. A Blast From the Past.....	1729
LVIII. Aren't You Curious?.....	1759
LIX. Who Provided the Referral?.....	1789
LX. A Surprise Business Proposal.....	1821
LXI. What a Bunch of Fucking Assholes!.....	1853
LXII. Are You a Cult Leader?.....	1887
LXIII. Hers and His First Times.....	1917
LXIV. A Serious Mindfuck.....	1947

LXV. The Mindfuck Continues.....	1975
LXVI. Holy God!.....	2003
LXVII. Flight Delay.....	2033
LXVIII. What is it you want?.....	2065

I. A Pleasurable Night All Around

July 17, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Birgit

Kjell was rock hard and his gorgeous dick was standing almost straight up. It was long and thick and I got seriously wet anticipating what it would feel like when it was inside me. My stomach tightened at the thought and I simply *had* to have it in me! Everything else could wait!

I smiled, lay down on the sleeping bag, and Kjell moved to kneel between my legs. He bent down to kiss my lips, and I pulled him on top of me, his muscular body crushing mine against the sleeping bag and soft earth beneath the tent. Our tongues tangled and wrapped my legs around Kjell's, with my knees as wide as I could spread them.

I broke the kiss and whispered, "Please...I want it."

He reached between us and I felt him rub his glans against my labia, making sure it was coated with my juices. I squirmed in anticipation of what was about to happen. I felt my labia part and pushed my hips up, taking Kjell partly inside me.

"OH!" I gasped into Kjell's mouth.

Kjell broke the kiss and whispered, "Are you OK?"

"Shut up and fuck me!" I growled.

I raised my hips and squeezed my legs, trying to get him further into me. Kjell pushed forward, and I felt him filling me, deeper and deeper, until I felt his balls touch my butt. I put my hands on Kjell's butt and squirmed and wiggled, rubbing my clit against him. When he pulled back, I lowered my hips and when he pushed forward again, I thrust them up, hard. He pulled back, then pushed into me again and I moaned in pleasure.

Kjell's dick felt SO good inside me, and I felt empty when he pulled back, but so good when he pushed forward. My entire body tingled, and each time he bumped my clit, I moaned because it felt so good. Kjell began thrusting in and out and I moved with him, and perhaps a minute later, he groaned and shoved himself deep into me.

"OH!" I gasped as hot fluid sprayed deep inside my pussy. I tightened my arms and legs and ground against Kjell and a few seconds later I gasped as I was overwhelmed with intense pleasure and my pussy spasmed, milking Kjell's cum from his dick. I was no longer a virgin and Loki could kiss my ass!

"Sorry," Kjell said, sounding unhappy.

I giggled softly, "It's normal for the first time! Next time you'll last longer!"

He kissed me and I kept my arms and legs tightly around him, grinding my clit against his pubic bone.

"Would you lick me," I asked. "Please?"

"I've never done it before," he said. "How?"

"Stick your tongue inside me, run it over my clit, and suck!" I demanded.

"I, uhm, just came in you," Kjell protested.

"And," I giggled, "if you want to cum in my mouth and have me swallow, you'll put your tongue in me right now!"

He slowly pulled out of me and I felt empty, but I knew from Aunt Bethany's book that teenage boys could get hard quickly! His tongue would do just fine until then!

[Östersund, Sweden]

 Steve

"Did you decide, Snuggle Bear?" Kara asked quietly, as dessert was served.

"He decided to eat dessert," Jessica grouched, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"So he better be ready to work off the extra sugar!"

"I'm having a few bites of «kladdkaka»," I replied. "A quarter the size of the ones you three chocoholics are having!"

"We don't have hormonal problems!" Jessica protested.

"Oh yes you do!" I chuckled. "It's called 'estrogen' and all I need to do is point to our daughters to prove my point!"

"Hey!" Ashley protested. "BOYS have testosterone poisoning!"

"I didn't deny that," I replied. "I simply said rejected your Mom's claim that women don't have problems with hormones! I'll give you two examples who aren't here -- Stephie and Birgit!"

Ashley rolled her eyes, "Do you see ME acting like them? Hmm?"

"No; in your case, your hormones turned you into a precocious imp!"

My wives, Katt, and Mikael laughed, and Katt explained to Kristina what I'd said, and we began eating our desserts. I had decided that I'd fulfill Katt's request, but before I did that, I'd need to speak with Mikael, and, more importantly, Elin. The «kladdkaka» was fantastic, and sickeningly sweet given my avoidance of sugar in all forms.

When we finished eating our dessert and coffee was served, I asked Mikael to chat and we went to the small bar where he ordered a beer and I ordered a bourbon, paying the outrageous Swedish price for alcohol that could have had me an entire bottle back home, as well as six bottles of good craft beer.

"You're OK with Katt's request?" I asked.

Mikael laughed, "I *asked* to watch! I'd never thought of something like that before, but when Katt said she wanted you to take her around the world, at center ice, with your wives watching, something screamed 'you *have* to watch!' and I want to. You know I'm OK with you and Katt, and I always have been. There's no risk, really, and why not let her fulfill her fantasies now and again? I have the same permission, just with a rule against her students."

"She told me about the young girl with the crush."

"And I had the same reaction you did to Lotta's request twenty years ago, or you would have had to Katt's request if she'd been younger."

"She told you about that?"

"Yes, and she really wanted you to do it, but I am positive you made the right decision."

"Me, too," I agreed. "I do need to speak to Elin and Katt before I make a final decision."

"I'm pretty sure Kara will kill you if you don't do it!"

I chuckled, "She made that clear, though the threat was only implied!"

[Stockholm, Sweden]

 Jesse

Anna and I went into our tent, and I zipped the entrance flaps closed. We couldn't really stand up straight in the tent as we were both over six feet tall, so we sat down on the two sleeping bags, close, but not touching. I was really anticipating being with Anna, because I really preferred athletic girls, and Anna reminded me of CeCe, with the same Nordic features -- tall, blonde, toned, with smallish breasts.

"Jesse," Anna said quietly, "I've never done this before."

"Slept in a tent?" I teased.

Anna laughed, which was what I had hoped would happen.

"I'd done that lots of times, silly! I've kissed, but that's all. I'm on «p-pillar», so we don't need «kondomer»."

"You read Doctor Bethany's book, right?" I asked.

"Yes, and I had a test. It was clean, of course!"

I scooted closer to Anna, and she turned so we could exchange a soft kiss, which quickly turned heated as our tongues battled. I moved my hand to cup Anna's

breast and was surprised when she slipped her hand into my swimming trunks and gently grasped my dick, and began stroking me. Her bold move led me to slide my hand down to her stomach, then push my fingers into her bikini bottoms.

My fingers encountered only smooth skin until they reached her labia, and I began gently massaging her clit through the hood of flesh that protected it, causing Anna to moan into my mouth. I moved my free hand to the string that tied her bikini top and pulled gently, causing the bow knot to come loose. I couldn't remove it completely, because Anna's hand was in my trunks, so I simply let it hang loosely and slid my free hand to cup her breast.

Anna broke our kiss and pulled her hand from my briefs so she could remove her bikini top, then quickly slipped off her bikini bottoms. I took off my trunks, and we resumed kissing and touching, with Anna stroking me gently while I massaged her clit with two fingers of my left hand and strummed her nipple with my right thumb.

After a few minutes, Anna broke the kiss and leaned back, clearly inviting me to lie on top of her, which I did, positioning myself so the tip of my dick was against her slick, plump labia.

"«Sakta och försiktigt»,»" Anna said. ("Slowly and gently.")

"Sorry," I said.

"Just go slow and be gentle," she said.

I kissed her, rubbed my glans along her labia to coat it with her juices, then slowly and carefully pushed into her. Anna gasped as I pushed past her labia, and with three gentle thrusts, embedded myself into her. She wrapped her arms and legs around me and took several deep breaths.

"OK," she whispered.

I lowered my head to kiss her and began slowly and gently thrusting in and out of her tight tunnel. Anna lay still for a moment, then began moving with me. It wasn't long before she tightened her arms and legs and began moving more forcefully. I matched the movements of her hips and soon enough we were really going at it, with Anna seemingly having lost control of her body and moving wildly and crazily.

Far from 'slow and gentle', we were fucking hard and fast and soon enough her body tensed, she groaned into my mouth, and then shuddered hard as she had her first orgasm. That seemed to push her to another level, and if she hadn't had her legs wrapped tightly around my butt, she'd have bucked me off.

Not one to pass up a challenge, I tried to drive her through the sleeping bag and into the ground. She had a second orgasm, then a third, and that one was so strong that the spasms brought me over the edge. I slammed into her, groaned, and began pumping cum deep into her spasming pussy. Anna ground against me to prolong her orgasm and when it had passed, we lay together, breathing hard.

"What happened to slow and gentle?" I asked when my breathing had recovered.

Anna laughed, "I was nervous, but then it felt so good I couldn't help myself! It, uhm, went for me three times! It went for you, obviously, too!"

"Obviously!"

"Can we have sex all night?" she asked.

"Absolutely!"

[Östersund, Sweden]

 Steve

"Katt said you wanted to talk to me," Elin said in Swedish, coming over to me at the rink during a break.

"Let's take a walk," I said, continuing in Swedish.

We walked up the steps and onto the concourse, which was empty, and began a circuit of the rink.

"Is there a problem?" Elin asked.

"Not at all," I replied. "I just wanted to make sure."

Elin laughed softly, "That I want to have sex with you on the ice at the rink in front of Katt and your wives after watching you and Katt?"

"Yes."

"And that I want you to take me every way you take Katt?"

"Yes."

"I do! Did Katt tell you the story?"

"Only the briefest outline."

"About three years ago, I met a skater who was twenty-three, and I had these feelings deep inside me that I both understood and didn't understand, if you know what I mean."

"I do."

"I went to Katt, because she's been like an older sister in addition to being my coach, and asked her about it. She told me what happened between her and the older skater when she was twelve, and suggested he was a bad choice, not to mention it would have been illegal for him to do it with me no matter how much I wanted him.

"When she described you and said I should find someone like you, I listened. Then she showed me your picture, and I had those same feelings. Then I heard you would be here and asked her if it might be possible. She said it was, and told me her fantasy, and it actually made me tingle! She said that she had taught me to skate, so if I wanted, she'd demonstrate how to have sex!"

"And being watched?"

Elin laughed, "Don't you know skaters love to show off?!"

She used «briljera», a word that perfectly described Katt.

"They do," I chuckled. "And you did say you wanted me to show off."

"Absolutely."

"And you know what Katt intends?"

Elin took my hand and brought it to her mouth, "Here," then to her mons, which was covered with the thin material of her skating costume, "here", and to her firm butt, which was also covered with thin material, "here."

"If that's what you want."

"It is! Will you do something else for me?"

"What's that?"

"If I win in Stockholm, spend the night with me and have sex all night, non-stop? You know, as a better prize than the medal!"

"I'll need to clear that with my wives," I replied. "And don't you think we should do it first before you ask for that?"

"If Katt is even half right, one night won't be enough for me! But she was clear that you did have rules and limits."

"If my wives approve, then, yes, I'll offer the prize!"

"Yes!" Elin said triumphantly. "And thank you for not being a fucking idiot!"

I laughed at her use of Katt's phrase, «jävla idiot!».

We completed the circuit and Elin went back to the ice while I sat down with Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne.

"Yes," I said to Kara.

"Oh, God," she moaned. "I'm wet just thinking about it!"

"You are such a hussy!" Jessica teased.

"There's a bigger problem," Suzanne interjected. "Steve won't have anything left after taking two athletic young skaters around the world!"

"I believe you and Jess will have to suffice," I chuckled. "And Elin suggested an extra prize if she wins the competition -- a night of non-stop sex."

"You're getting awfully old for that," Jessica said with a smirk. "Think you can handle a sixteen-year-old nympho?"

"Like Kara?" I asked.

"You did OK for a time when you were younger, but you needed my help, and Suzanne's and she still can wear us out!"

"Yes, I can!" Kara declared mirthfully. "I think it's OK if you provide an extra prize for her winning."

"I agree," Jessica said, shaking her head.

"Me, too," Suzanne said. "I had my night of non-stop sex with the three of you!"

"And you had an audience for losing your virginity," Kara replied.

"I wasn't showing off! I think Elin will!"

I laughed because she'd promised to do exactly that.

[Stockholm, Sweden]

 Birgit

"Yes!" I hissed as Kjell put his tongue on my clit. "There!"

His mouth felt good, but he didn't really know what he was doing.

"Tease it with the tip of your tongue, then close your mouth and suck gently," I instructed.

He was getting the hang of it, and I could feel my pleasure building.

"Push your tongue in as far as you can and swirl it a few times, then lick my clit!" I commanded.

I put my hand on the back of Kjell's head and pushed his face into my pussy as he did as I'd ordered. The pressure, combined with his tongue on me, was enough to bring me off, and I moaned and shuddered. Kjell lifted his head and my orgasm weakened, then stopped.

"DON'T STOP!" I demanded.

The next orgasm was better, and thankfully, Kjell didn't stop. When it had passed, I maneuvered Kjell onto his back, straddled his face, put my pussy on his mouth, and grasped his semi-flaccid dick. It was of no use to me in that state, so I ran my tongue over it, tasting my girl juices. I felt Kjell's tongue moving in me and pushed my hips down a bit so that his chin pressed on my clit.

I held his dick up and began licking the head like an ice cream cone, causing Kjell to moan, though it was muffled because his mouth was covered by my pussy. I opened my mouth and took the head of Kjell's dick into my mouth. It sucked gently and swirled my tongue around his spongy flesh, wondering what his cum would taste like.

I decided to see how much of him I could get into my mouth, so I began slowly moving my head down. I sucked softly as my lips slid along Kjell's shaft, and the head of his dick moved over my tongue towards the back of my mouth. I managed to get about two thirds of it in before it touched the back of my mouth and made me gag a bit.

I wrapped my hand around his shaft to know how far I could go, then cupped his balls with my other hand and began slowly bobbing my head, sucking and running my tongue around him. Kjell was licking my clit and sucking, and I squirmed to rub myself on his chin as I bobbed up and down, giving my first ever blowjob during my first ever sixty-nine.

Every few bobs, I kept just the head of his dick in my mouth, swirled my tongue, and gently squeezed his balls. Kjell groaned and twitched each time I squeezed, and I wondered how long he would last, because I wanted to cum at least once before he did. I was getting close, but slowed down my bobbing so that could happen first.

My orgasm was close, so I squeezed my muscles tight, which always helped when I rubbed myself, and began bobbing faster. A minute later, I groaned around Kjell's dick as my pussy spasmed, and began sucking harder and stroking with my hand while I bobbed up and down.

I felt Kjell's muscles tense, and he twitched hard, so I moved so that just the head of his dick was in my mouth. I swirled my tongue, sucked hard, stroked him, and squeezed his balls. Kjell groaned and a second later, a spurt of hot cum shot into my mouth. Another spurt of salty bitter cum jetted into my mouth, and I continued swirling my tongue, stroking, and sucking. A third, fourth, and fifth spurt followed, then two very weak spurts signaled the end of his orgasm.

I swallowed his cum, slipped my hands under his butt, and slowly took him into my mouth, doing my best to get him completely in me. I couldn't quite do it, despite breathing through my nose and going slowly, but I did get most of him in. I slowly bobbed, moving up until just the head of his dick was in my mouth, swirled my tongue around it, then slowly took him back in.

Kjell groaned with each bob and after I'd bobbed a dozen times, I released him, turned and gave him a fierce French kiss, his face covered with my girl juices and my tongue covered with his cum. His eyes flew open when he realized, but he didn't break the kiss. I did, finally, after a minute.

"Like that?" I asked with a smirk.

He smiled and nodded his head vigorously, like a smart boy!

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I want to be on top this time!"

I kissed him, then slid down to get him hard with my mouth.

[Östersund, Sweden]

 Steve

"What's the plan?" I asked Katt once she'd locked up the rink and set the permitter, but not the internal, alarms.

"How's your skating?"

"About the same as when I was in Sweden twenty-two years ago."

"Then we take a lap naked, go to the bearskin rug Mikael and Kara are spreading, I give you a blowjob, we sixty-nine to get you hard, we screw, sixty-nine, then you take me in the butt! I have disinfectant wipes and wet washcloths to clean up before you and Elin do the same thing!"

"Lube?" I asked.

"Mikael will leave it on the rug."

"And our audience?"

"Mikael will bring chairs and blankets onto the ice! The stands or player benches are too far for a good view!"

"You're as crazy as Kara!"

Katt laughed, "Crazier, because I can actually fuck one guy besides my husband, and she limits herself."

Five minutes later, everything was set up, Katt and I undressed, put on skates, and carefully skated one lap, our arms around each other, before skating to the heavy bearskin rug where our audience was waiting. I wasn't self-conscious about being naked in front of Mikael, as I'd been in the sauna with naked guys since I'd been in Melanie's sauna with Pete in High School. That had been the first, and only, time I'd had sex while another guy was in the room.

Katt and I sat down to remove our skates, and as soon as they were off, she attacked me, causing me too quickly forget about the audience as she took me in her mouth, sucking and swirling her tongue while stroking me to get me hard. I closed my eyes and focused on the pleasure, allowing Katt to bring me off.

Katt swallowed, sucked me until I softened, then we kissed for a bit. She switched to sixty-nine to get me hard again, and we had an energetic fuck, my pleasure enhanced by her muscle tone, which was as good as it ever had been. After three good orgasms for her, I had mine, and I stayed inside her, kissing until I softened.

After another round of sixty-nine to get me hard, I applied lube, Katt got onto her hands and knees, and I pushed into her rear. Katt squeezed her muscles tightly as she always did, and demanded I fuck her hard, which I did, while she rubbed herself. She had three more orgasms before I came, after which I pulled

out. Katt got the damp washcloth, cleaned my dick, wiped it with an alcohol wipe, then used a second washcloth to wipe off the alcohol, though it evaporated quickly. We lay together for about ten minutes, cuddling, to give me time to recover.

"«Din tur, Elin, om du är redo!»" Katt declared, getting up. ("Your turn, Elin, if you're ready!")

"«Visst!»" Elin exclaimed. ("Absolutely!")

Elin stood up and stripped off her skating outfit, revealing her lithe body, with small breasts and a cleanly shaved mons. I put my skates on, stood up, took Elin's hand and moved off the bearskin rug. As I had with Katt, I put my arm around Elin's waist and we began skating, our hips touching.

"Still interested?" I asked.

"Absolutely! But I want it to be slow and last as long as possible!"

"That's my preference," I replied. "Katt is a wildcat!"

Elin laughed, "No kidding! It looked almost violent!"

"I tend to shape my behavior to what the woman wants, but as I said, my preference is for slow, sensual lovemaking, with the girl squeezing her internal muscles as we move together."

"Is that true for me sucking you, too? I mean, going slow?"

"Yes."

"What do you like? I mean, how should I do it?"

"Lick me like an ice cream cone, then treat it like a Popsicle. The glans, the wide part at the top, is the most sensitive, so it's not important how much of my shaft you can get into your mouth as it is to use your tongue and suck. Stroking my shaft with your hands, and cupping my scrotum, enhances the pleasure, but it's mainly about your tongue and my glans. And when I'm close, swirl your tongue around my glans and suck. I'm surprised Katt didn't tell you."

"She did, but I have the impression that Katt told me how she likes to do it."

"I'd say you're probably right."

We completed a circuit and went to the bearskin rug, where we sat down to remove our skates. The girls were sitting in their chairs, but Mikael's was empty, and I was sure he had gone some place where he couldn't see, so as not to violate Elin's wishes. When our skates were off, Elin and I sat side by side and exchanged our first kiss, just a soft press of our lips together.

[Stockholm, Sweden]

 Jesse

"How do I do this?" Anna asked, her head resting on my stomach and her hand wrapped around my semi-erect shaft.

"Trust me," I said, "anything you do with your mouth will feel good! Just no teeth!"

Anna laughed and nipped my stomach.

"Are you sure about that?" she asked mirthfully.

"Yes!" I declared. "Positive!"

"We'll see!"

I felt her tongue on my glans, then she gently nipped me with her teeth and to my surprise, I instantly got hard as a rock. Anna, for having never given a blowjob, was fantastic, and the gentle nips with her teeth were amazingly pleasurable, and she was careful not to scrape them along my shaft. When I came, she nipped me while swirling her tongue and I thought my head would explode from the pleasure.

"Holy shit," I breathed when my orgasm had passed.

"What was that about no teeth?" Anna asked impishly as she moved up to French kiss me.

"That was unbelievable!" I declared.

"So do it that way every time?"

"Yes! Now, let me lick you!"

Anna lay on her back, spread her legs, and I moved between them. Turnabout was fair play, and I gently nipped her prominent clit, which caused her to groan loudly. Each time I brought her off, I nipped her and her orgasms were *huge*. After two orgasms for her, I was hard, so I rolled on my back and allowed Anna to mount me.

"That was intense," she gasped as she ground against my pubic bone with my rock-hard erection filling her completely.

"We have to try that as sixty-nine," I said, breathing hard.

"Later," Anna gasped, then leaned down to French kiss me.

She came three times before I did, and when I went soft, she stretched out next to me.

"You wouldn't want to come stay at my house, would you?" Anna asked.

"I'm going to be in Saint Petersburg from the 20th to the 24th, then my dad and his wives are going to Gothenburg for a couple of days, but I don't have to go because I don't really know anyone they'll see there."

"So other than when you're in Russia? Stay with me and sleep in my bed?"

"If your parents are OK with it."

"It's up to me, not them, because I'm fifteen."

"That doesn't mean they approve," I replied.

"They'll be fine. They're Swedish parents!"

"Then yes."

"I'll even share you with Freja, because I know she wants you again."

"Only if you're OK with it."

"You can't be my boyfriend unless you move here, which I don't think you will, so I'm OK with it. Of course, if you DO want to stay and play ice hockey with *good* players instead of Americans!"

I laughed, "We play Canadian teams at tournaments and they usually kick our butts. We did OK against Russian teams when we played there a few years ago."

"You played in Russia?"

"Yes. It was arranged by my friend General Colonel Dmitry Sergeyevich Grigoryev of the Russian Army, whose retired and teaching in the US, and my other friend, Parliamentarian Ivan Konstantinovich Voronin."

"How did you meet them?"

"My dad dated Vanya's daughter before she married General Dmitry. When I'm in Russia, I'll hang out with my friends in the Russian Army who used to be in the Soviet Army. A Colonel and a Lieutenant Colonel, plus some lower-ranking officers."

"That's totally cool! How many times have you been there?"

"Three."

"Where else have you been?"

"Sweden, obviously, plus Canada. We were briefly in Amsterdam and London on flights."

"Do you have a girl you visit in Russia?"

"No, but I have a friend, Eugen, who I'll see, besides the soldiers. We'll hang out with his friends and play football and do other stuff."

"Ready to go again?" Anna asked as she rested her hand lightly on my stomach.

"Yes!"

 Birgit

I really liked being on top, because it made it easy for me to cum, but Kjell came before I'd had enough. I almost giggled because if I was like Mom, there was no such thing as 'enough', and I was like Mom! The 'problem' was remedied by sixty-nine, and once Kjell was hard again, I rode him some more.

"Are you ever satisfied?" Kjell teased when I stretched out on top of him.

"NO!" I giggled. "Never! But we have lots of time together before I go home!"

"Do your parents know what we're doing?"

"No, but they agree it's none of their business. But I don't want to advertise, if you know what I mean."

"Well, you're staying with us when your dad and moms are in Russia, and Mom and Dad won't say anything if you sleep in my room instead of the guest room. But why?"

I actually wasn't sure, because my dad knew I was interested in Kjell, but it just didn't seem right to tell him and my mom. I had no idea why I felt that way, and until I figured it out, it would be my secret.

"Because it's between you and me," I said. "I mean, the others here can guess because we're sharing a tent."

"Are there any guys back home you like?"

"My friend Peter is OK, but he goes to church every week, and I don't think I could deal with that!"

"Me, either!"

"What about a girl for you?"

"I hang out with the girls who were at the party and my other friends. I'll probably ask one of them out after you go home."

"Decided you like sex enough that you want to keep having it?"

"What do you think?" Kjell asked.

"I think we should do it again! That's what I think!"

[Östersund, Sweden]

 Steve

After Elin and I kissed for a few minutes, she moved between my legs, grasped my flaccid shaft, and planted kisses along it, followed by running her tongue along it and around my glans. The blowjob was exactly as I preferred, slow and sensual, and Elin was in no rush either. She built my pleasure slowly, and when I let her know I was close, she lashed my glans with her tongue and sucked while stroking me. A minute later, I groaned and shot into her mouth.

After she'd taken the last spurt in her mouth, Elin moved up to French kiss me. She hadn't swallowed, something I was sure Katt had encouraged, so we kissed sloppily, sharing my cum. When we broke the kiss, I gently pushed Elin onto her back, moved down and suckled her small breasts before moving between her legs, deciding to save sixty-nine for after we'd made love.

Elin tasted coppery, and I feasted on her tangy juices, licking and sucking her clit, bringing her off twice before I was hard enough to enter her. I moved up, lodged my glans against her slick labia, then lowered my head so we could exchange a French kiss, this time sharing her flavor. I broke the kiss, looked deeply into her eyes, then slowly pushed forward, my glans spreading her labia and entering her tight, hot tunnel. Three gentle thrusts later, I was fully embedded in Elin's wonderful pussy.

"«Herre gud!»" she gasped. ("Oh, God!")

"OK?" I asked.

"«Visst! Fortsätt!»" ("Absolutely! Continue!")

"«Vira dina ben runt mig och rör dig med mig», " I requested. ("Wrap your legs around me and move with me.")

Elin wrapped her legs around my upper thighs, I lowered my head to French kiss her, then began slowly thrusting in and out of her very tight pussy. After a few strokes, Elin began moving her body in unison with mine in the ancient lover's dance. Each time I pushed deeply into Elin, I ground against her for a few seconds and she squeezed and released her internal muscles, her pussy delightfully gripping my shaft.

Elin was wet enough that I wasn't worried about going for as long as possible, and each time she orgasmed, she got even wetter. I didn't look at my watch, but it was at least twenty minutes before I felt the urge, and I held back until I'd given her one last orgasm before pushing deep into her lasting jet after jet of cum into her spasming pussy.

I wasn't done, though, and pulled gently out of her, sliding down to give her an additional orgasm with my mouth, before moving up to kiss her once more, then move next to her so we could cuddle.

"«Fantastisk!»" Elin said dreamily. ("Amazing!")

"It was amazing," I agreed.

"10.0 from the American judge!" Kara said breathlessly.

"Steve is still Steve," Jessica said. "Slow, sensual lovemaking is his thing."

"Ignore them," I said to Elin, though I was laughing.

"I've never had a perfect score on the ice before!" she declared. "So I'll take it!"

"Steve just scored big-time on the ice!" Katt teased.

"And I'm going to win the competition in Stockholm to get the proper first prize!" Elin declared. "A night of non-stop sex!"

"Now I'm jealous!" Katt exclaimed.

"Ready for the last one?" I asked Elin.

"Yes! How do we do it?"

"First, we sixty-nine, until you have an orgasm and I'm hard. Then you get on your stomach, I spread lubricant on myself and on your rear, then slowly push into you. You should rub yourself with your fingers while I thrust, because you need to stimulate your clit to cum."

"Slow, right?"

"Yes, but not for too long, because it might be very uncomfortable."

"I'll tell you," she said.

Ten minutes later, properly lubed, I spread Elin's butt cheeks, lodged my glans against her rear entrance, then leaned down.

"Take a few deep breaths and relax as best you can."

She did and as she blew out the third deep breath, I pushed forward, my glans popping into her tight butt. Elin sucked in her breath, then blew it out again and I pushed forward. It took five breaths and give thrusts to bury myself in her. Elin slipped her hand underneath herself and began rubbing as I pulled back, then carefully pushed forward.

"Squeeze your muscles as I move," I whispered.

She complied, and the pleasure was intense as I moved in and out of her. After a few minutes of thrusting, Elin shuddered as she had an orgasm. I continued thrusting and a few minutes later, she had a second one.

"Keep...going," Elin gasped.

I did and after she had her third orgasm, I let my pleasure build until I pumped her tight butt full of cum. When my orgasm passed, I gently pulled out and cleaned myself with the additional damp washcloths and alcohol wipe. Once I was clean, I moved up to kiss Elin and cuddle her again.

"That was strange," she said. "But when I win, I want to do it again!"

"A night of anything you want," I replied. "Until I run out of gas, so to speak."

"How many times?"

"Six, but with the right encouragement, I've managed more. But I have a tongue and fingers, too!"

"Come to the 'kiss and cry' with me when I win! Then take me to bed and have sex until it's time for breakfast!"

"And your parents will be OK with that?"

"I'm sixteen, and I'll have my own hotel room!"

"Which hotel?" I asked.

"The InterContinental."

"That's where we're staying, so that makes it easy! I'll get your room upgraded to a suite!"

"You can do that?"

"Yes. I'm a member of their club and there are privileges. A suite will have a whirlpool bath."

"That sounds like fun!"

"It is!"

[Cádiz, Spain]

 Matthew

"I love making love under the stars," Chelsea sighed as we cuddled afterwards. "I wish we could do this back home."

"That's difficult," I replied. "We do have the mirrors, though, and you like those!"

"I do," Chelsea giggled. "I wonder if Eduardo would install them in my bedroom?"

"I can ask."

"I was thinking more about your dad giving away my mom at her wedding," Chelsea said. "Do you think they might have..."

"I do NOT want to think about that!" I declared. "Why would you think that?"

"Because I know about your dad!" Chelsea giggled.

"Just drop it," I requested. "Honestly, if they did, it's their business, and I do not want to know!"

"Can we just sleep here, under the stars?"

"Let's put our bathing suits on," I suggested. "We don't want trouble if any police come along on patrol."

We put on our suits then cuddled together and fell asleep.

II. Swedish Friends, Russian Friends, and Ancient History.

July 18, 2002, Östersund, Sweden

"Did you enjoy the show last night?" I asked Kara at breakfast.

It was only Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, and me because Ashley was staying at Tina's, and would be there until after my wives, Jesse, and I came back from Russia.

"I did!" Kara replied happily. And I was very happy you were able to go one more time back at the hotel!"

"Encouragement from his three beautiful wives did the trick!" Suzanne exclaimed.

"What's the plan for today?" Jessica asked.

"We'll hang out at Tina's, ride horses, walk in the countryside, and generally chill. Oh, and if anyone who wants to make love in a hayloft, I'd be happy to oblige!"

"Including Tina?" Kara teased.

"No, because Nils would never agree to that, and because that's not where Tina and I have been for nearly two decades. She's my best female friend, bar none."

"Speaking of that," Kara said, "what are you going to do about Bethany?"

"I don't see how the relationship can continue, nor do I see how she can have anything to do with our kids or any of the cousins. She'll poison their minds if we allow that. Things will be bad enough with society in general, and allowing a wolf in sheep's clothing into the flock is a non-starter."

"Don't you think that's a bit harsh?" Jessica asked.

"No.," I said firmly.

"What about Nicholas?" Kara asked.

"I won't punish the children for the sins of the mother. Albert and Jane are basically locked in, so nothing Bethany says to Nicholas will really affect Albert, and he'd ignore it, anyway. I'll speak to the parents of the cousins to make sure they understand just how far off the rails Bethany has gone.

"When I speak with Kathy, I'll encourage her to have a conversation with Bethany. Maybe she'll have success, but I won't count on it, despite them having been friends since sixth grade. The other thing I'm going to do is order several cases of the current edition of *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* so I or the kids can hand them out to counter the 'revised' version Bethany is preparing."

"You can't stop it?"

"I will try to talk to Bethany once more, but I don't think it will have any effect. Tom said the publisher is pushing for the revised version to counter the pushback they've had over the years. You know they get complaints all the time from the Kent van der Meers and Tim Saddlers of the world."

"You should make it your mission to deflower every virgin female in their flocks!" Kara suggested with a smirk.

"Trouble I do not need," I replied. "All it would take is for one girl to claim it wasn't consensual, even if she were over eighteen, and it would all be over. Vickie and Sandy were special circumstances. You know I have to be more careful, because the world has changed, and that's why we changed the rules to be firm about age of consent with very limited, if any exceptions and approval in advance from the three of you. And parents who won't lose their minds. And even then, fifteen is the minimum, no matter what. And honestly, with few exceptions, girls under eighteen are not going to be interested in me. They'll go to Jesse instead!"

All three of my wives laughed.

"For a kid who does not want to be defined by his dad, he's sure a lot like you!" Suzanne observed.

"That's true, but having similar outlooks doesn't make him my clone, which is what concerned him. He's made his own way, even if some of the results are similar. That said, he, like my other kids, believes in monogamous marriage for life. Heck, Albert and Matthew are already permanent. And I still say Stephe and Nicholas will get back together once Nicholas turns fifteen or so."

"I spoke to Mom yesterday," Kara responded, "and she said Stephe is in a much better mood and seems happier."

"I think Stephe needed a break from us, not just Nicholas," I said. "Just as Birgit wanted a break from you. The kids need their space and their asserting their independence and we have to encourage that, not fight it. Remember, they get to define the relationship, not us, and if we want a positive relationship with them for the rest of our lives, we can never forget that."

"It's so easy for you to let go," Jessica observed.

"I'm not sure 'easy' is the right word," I said. "But I learned the dangers of not letting go from my experience growing up. And we've seen how ineffective 'positive control' is with teens, with Vickie, Sandy, and Kara being perfect examples. All three grew up in Evangelical households and chose a very different path despite the best efforts of their fathers."

"Dad was coming around," Kara interjected.

"Yes, but he would never have approved of our trio or quartet."

"I hope Kathy can get Bethany to see things differently," Kara said.

"Me, too."

 Ashley

"How did you meet my dad?" I asked Tina when we were doing dishes after breakfast.

"He never told you the story?"

"No. I think Birgit might know, but I don't."

"It was April, 1980, and he came to my school in Alingsås to speak about America and encourage kids to become exchange students. I thought he was totally cool and handsome, and I followed him around like a puppy dog!"

I giggled, "You and every other teenage girl on the planet!"

"I actually wasn't a teenager. I had just turned twelve, and I was sure your dad would think I was too young to be a girlfriend, even though he was only sixteen."

"A girlfriend, as in having sex?"

"Yes."

"I turn eleven next month and I can't imagine wanting to do that a year from now. Fifteen or sixteen, but not twelve."

"I didn't say it was a good idea!" Tina said with a smile. "But I was careful not to do or say anything that would make your dad uncomfortable. He only visited for a day, and other than introduce myself, I didn't say anything. After he left, I asked the YFU coordinator for his address in Göteborg. I wrote to him and asked if we could be pen pals. He agreed, and over twenty years later, we write to each other about once a month."

"Why not use email?" I asked.

"Because there's something special about writing a letter, putting it in an envelope, affixing postage, and sending it across the sea!"

"Weird!" I said. "Just text or email!"

Tina laughed, "Totally not the same!"

"Did you see him again before he came home?"

"No. We wrote, and then in June 1982 he came to Sweden on a vacation and visited. I was fourteen, then."

I giggled, "I know what that means!"

"Your dad does have a reputation in that regard."

"Well," I smirked, "he seems to make the girls very happy and they tell their friends..."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it? It bugs Stephie, but not Birgit, and the boys simply do not care and do not pay attention."

"But you do?"

I giggled, "Yes, but not as much as Birgit. I think she has a list!"

"That does sound like your sister!"

"So what happened?" I asked. "I mean, besides the obvious!"

"We talked about a future together, but it really wasn't practical. Your dad was nineteen and in college, and I wasn't even in «gymnasiet». Moving to the US wasn't really something I wanted to do, and had your dad moved here then, I think he'd have been with Karin. I love your dad more than anyone in the world except Nils and Anna, but the situation made it such that we'd be best friends, not a couple."

"Did you plan for it to happen?"

"Yes, but your dad had no clue because I had been very careful in my letters not to let on what I wanted. I surprised him, and it turned out to be a beautiful experience that I will always treasure. We saw each other again in 1984 when he was in Sweden again, but after that, even though I hoped there would be a way, there wasn't, and I started dating. Eventually I married Nils, and we had Anna."

"Would you have been OK with Dad having more than one wife?"

"NO!" Tina declared emphatically. "And neither would Karin, Katt, nor Pia. We Swedish girls are open-minded, but not *that* open-minded!"

"Ashley?" Anna said, coming into the kitchen. "I finished my chores. Do you want to ride horses?"

"Yes! We're almost done!"

[Stockholm, Sweden]

 Birgit

"Did you defeat Loki?" Jesse asked me with a sly grin when we had a moment alone together.

"Finally!" I exclaimed. "How was Anna?"

"No details, Sis."

I rolled my eyes, "If I could listen to Rachel tell me about being with Dad, what's the big deal?"

"Anna's privacy! And the same is true for Kjell."

He had a point, because I had asked Kjell to keep what we'd done private.

"Sorry," I said. "You're right."

"You're OK, though?"

"Are you kidding?! I've been ready for months! And we figured it out!"

Jesse laughed, "It's pretty simple, and even little kids have an idea of how it works!"

"I think you know what I meant! We were both virgins! You had a teacher!"

"No comment," Jesse replied.

"I thought we agreed we'd talk about anything," I protested.

"But we still have to respect everyone's privacy. I mean, sure, you can figure out who Dad has been with, but does he discuss them with you?"

"Well, no," I admitted.

"Exactly," Jesse said. "I only asked you to make sure you were OK."

"I appreciate it."

"You know I'm here for you," Jesse said. "And if anyone treats you badly, they'll have to deal with *me!*"

I laughed, "I can take care of myself!"

"I'm sure you can, brown belt and all, but if anyone even thinks about hurting you, I'll end their existence. Period."

"Thanks, Jesse. I've never said this before, and I may never say it again, but I love you, Brother."

"And I love you, too, Sis. Let's NEVER speak of this again!"

"Agreed!"



July 20, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Jesse

"How was your sailing and camping trip?" Dad asked when he and his wives arrived back in Stockholm on Saturday.

"A lot of fun! We swam, played football, grilled, listened to music, and hung out."

"Remember we have to leave for Arlanda tomorrow at 8:00am," Dad said.

"Kjell's party ends at midnight, so it won't be a problem," I replied. "By ending then, everyone can get home on the «Tunnelbana» or a bus. They're all going to hang out tomorrow, too."

"I heard from Vanya, and your dinner at the Officer's Mess is set for Monday night."

"I wish my uniform still fit!" I grinned. "General Jesse!"

"I think you might find them less receptive to that being cute now than when you were a little kid. Did you speak to Eugen?"

"I called yesterday when we came back from the island. I'm staying with him on Tuesday night. We'll hang out with his friends all day both days, including going out to dinner on Tuesday night."

"OK. That won't affect the hotel because we have a suite with two bedrooms. I switched that once your sisters decided they weren't going to Russia."

"What are you doing Wednesday?"

"Probably walking around the city, doing some sightseeing, and spending time with my wives."

"No girls for you in Russia?" I asked with a smirk. "Eugen's mom is married and so is Lucy Alexa! And she's pregnant!"

"Saint Petersburg is part of the extended honeymoon with my wives. Other than our dinner with Vanya, Anna, Yuri, and Lyusya, we don't have any specific plans. As I said, we'll do some sightseeing, but otherwise, we'll just relax."

"Cool. I need to go meet the gang at the park for the start of the party."

"Have fun!" Dad said.

I left the hotel and headed for Nicholas' apartment so we could go to the park together.

 Steve

"What time will the kids be here?" I asked Karin when we arrived at the apartment.

"After they have dinner at the new pizza restaurant, so around 7:00pm. We'll be gone by then because we're meeting my parents, you, and your wives for dinner. I figured we'd go give them space, which is why I arranged dinner for tonight. Kristian and I plan to arrive back at the apartment around midnight when the party ends. Birgit and Jesse are going back to the hotel, right?"

"That's what they said. We leave for Arlanda at 8:00am, so if he ends up staying here, he'll need to be up early, so I doubt he'll do that. Birgit will take the «Tunnelbana» here. Thanks for taking her in while we're gone."

Karin smiled, "Of course! She'll be in the guest bedroom."

"None of my business," I replied.

"I think they're still trying to figure things out," Karin said. "Being fourteen, it's still a bit young."

"Says the young woman who wanted me at thirteen!"

"I didn't say it was wrong," Karin replied. "Just that things aren't so clear at that age. And Kjell only turned fourteen four days ago! Birgit, on the other hand, is fourteen going on thirty-four!"

"As adult as she usually is, she's still occasionally a kid," I replied. "But she's learning and maturing."

"Far faster than you did," Karin said lightly.

"That's a fairly low bar," I replied. "You were crucial in helping me grow up."

"That did seem to be my role in your life, as opposed to the one I wanted when I was a teenager. But I'm happy, and happy that we remained friends though it all."

"It was touch and go at times," I replied. "Mostly my fault."

"We were kids, Steve. I don't blame you for anything, nor do I regret anything. You shouldn't either."

"Except for how I treated you," I replied.

"Forgiven long ago. If I don't blame you, you shouldn't blame yourself. I know you don't buy into that crap that your Catholic mom does! That whole guilt trip thing is a surefire way to mess yourself up, which I think you know."

"I do," I replied. "This isn't guilt, but I do sometimes wonder what would have happened had I not rejected you when you first wanted to sleep with me."

"You weren't ready," Karin replied. "I don't think it would have changed anything except it would have been a conscious act on your part, with me."

"Which might have made all the difference in the world," I replied. "But that's water under the bridge."

"It is. And given other things that happened, probably for the best."

"I'm not sure about that," I replied. "I think it would have completely altered the trajectory of my life. That said, you know I won't trade my current situation for a 'what if?' scenario, and can't imagine a world without my kids."

"It's one of those points in our life where a decision completely altered the future, and there is no going back, not that either of us wants to."

"True. Did Birgit speak to you about hosting her in two years?"

"Yes. We're happy to do it, of course. Her Swedish is very good, though I find it amusing she speaks «Göteborska»!"

"Not just «Göteborgska», but «Göteborgska» with twenty-year-old slang, inflection, and vocabulary! I've actually heard a change in her accent since we've been here."

"I assume you'll teach Ashley, given she wants to do the same?"

"Yes, though she's thinking of staying with Katt and Kristina."

"She's at Tina's now, right?"

"Yes. She'll take the train here on the 27th."

"She said she'd call me with the details. What time do you get in from Göteborg?"

"Mid afternoon. We're taking the earliest train."

"Shall we join the others before they get the wrong idea?"

I laughed, "My wives always have the wrong idea, but Kristian knows better!"

"He does!"

 Birgit

"You put your things in the guest room,?" Kjell said in Swedish as we headed for the park to join his friends. "Are you sleeping in there tonight?"

"No way!" I declared. "I'm sleeping in your bed! But that's between you and me, and nobody else."

"My parents?"

"Well, OK, but they won't say anything, will they?"

"I don't think so, but Mom and your dad are really close."

"That's one way to put it," I giggled.

"That was a long time ago, before either of us were born," Kjell said. "Dad had girlfriends before Mom."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to imply they were doing anything now, just that they had."

Kjell shrugged, "So? I mean, am I the only person you'll ever have sex with?"

The answer was obviously 'no' because I'd definitely had sex with Lilibeth.

"No."

"And if we stay friends, and people know we were together, does it matter? I mean, in the sense that because we did it, we'll always do it?"

"Sorry," I said again.

"Birgit, you want to keep our situation private, right? So why are you talking about what other people do? Why do you even care?"

He was right, of course, and he was saying the same thing other people had said to me, and maybe it was just that I was so fixated on Dad that I couldn't help myself. I still wanted him, but I also knew it wasn't going to happen because I'd been too obvious about it.

"You're right, of course," I agreed. "Is there anything special you want to do tonight to celebrate your birthday?"

"You mean you and me? Or everyone?"

"Us!"

"I like what we've done together, and I'm happy with anything you want to do."

"We need to take a shower together in the morning!"

Kjell laughed, "Our showers here are very short because we don't want to use too much hot water."

"Bummer!"

"Before I forget, Mom signed up for the laundry for tomorrow so you can wash clothes."

"That is so weird," I replied. "But Dad told me about it. Do people really start feuds over washing clothes?"

"Absolutely. If you try to use the laundry room when it's not your time, it's a serious violation of the rules and people get very upset."

"I like living in a house where I can just do laundry whenever I want."

"What about a conflict? There are a lot of people living in your house."

"We just kind of go with the flow, really. And everyone is cool about it."

"You start High School, right?"

"Yes. And you have two years before «gymnasiet», right?"

"Yes. Most likely we wouldn't be in the same class when you come here. And someone will have to arrange for you to go to a specific «gymnasiet», it's not like your High Schools."

"Actually, I'm going to a private High School," I said. "My moms felt we'd do better at the Lab School at the University of Chicago where they both work. Jesse will stay in the public school so he can play ice hockey."

We arrived at the park where Per, Ester, and Henrik were waiting with a soccer ball. We greeted them, and when the rest of the group arrived, we split into teams to play.

[Cádiz, Spain]

 Matthew

"Mom, do you have a minute?" I asked when Chelsea was in the shower.

"What's up?"

"Privately, please."

Eduardo nodded and Mom and I went to the great room.

"Is something bugging you?"

"Yes, but it's not something I really want to talk about or know the answer to."

"You've lost me," Mom said.

"Please do not confirm or deny," I said. "I just want to know how to handle Chelsea because she has this idea that Dad and her mom got together."

"What makes her think that?" Mom asked.

"Dad gave her away at her wedding, and Chelsea doesn't think that makes any sense unless they had been together before that."

"I think your answer to Chelsea is to simply tell her to ask her mom. I'm not sure how Aunt Jennie will respond to a question like that, but that's between them. Would it bother you if it were true?"

I shrugged, "Would it be any weirder than marrying my first cousin?"

Mom laughed, "Once removed, which is why it's OK in Illinois. And yes, a lot of people would find that strange. But you don't tell people that, right?"

"Because things would just get weird," I replied. "People get too bent out of shape about stuff that doesn't matter. You know me. I just do my own thing and let everyone else do their own thing. I'm happy, Chelsea is happy, and that's all that matters. I wish she'd just drop it because I can't think of something about which I'd care less."

"Then just do what I suggested and encourage her to talk to her mom. It's up to Aunt Jennie what she says to Chelsea."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll do that."

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Stephie

"You seem to be in a much better mood," Grandma Nancy said. "Being here, away from everyone, seems to have helped."

"But I love my family," I protested.

"Which doesn't mean you don't need time away from them! Each of us needs our own space, and you have yours here, and don't have to worry about your parents or your siblings. You've spent time with your Grandpa, your Aunt Joyce and her family and your Aunts Deborah and Chrisy and their kids. You're enjoying yourself, and that's a good thing."

"Dad thought I was being a bitch," I said.

Grandma Nancy smiled and shook her head, "No, that was your sisters! Your dad thinks you were kidnapped by aliens and replaced with an evil clone!"

I laughed, "That's what Mr. Felipe at the dojo said about teenage girls!"

"He's not wrong!" Grandma Nancy said with a smile. "I remember when your mom turned sixteen."

I laughed, "Mom met Dad! She wasn't kidnapped by aliens! It was hormones!"

"Which I think is what your friend Mr. Felipe is trying to say, but being silly!"

"But Mom wasn't a bitch!"

"Do you know the story of what your mom and dad call their 'Year in the Wilderness'?"

"No."

"You should ask them. I think you'll learn something important about your parents."

"Deborah said the same thing about the girl I'm named for -- that I should talk to dad about her and that I might learn something about him and about myself."

"I think Deborah is correct," Aunt Nancy said. "I don't think you've spent enough time talking with your parents."

"Didn't you just say it was good to be away from them?" I countered.

"I did, but both can be true. I think part of it is that you object to your dad's arrangements with your moms. But if they allow you to live your life the way you want, shouldn't you allow them to live their lives the way they want?"

'As long as he doesn't try to fuck my friends!' I thought, but didn't say. Fortunately, they all thought he was too old, unlike some of Birgit's friends. But I couldn't talk about that with anyone outside the family.

"Yes," I agreed.

"Do you want to talk about Nicholas?"

"Not really," I replied.

"OK. I'm here if you want to talk about it. Shall we get started making cookies?"

"Yes!"

[Stockholm, Sweden]

 Birgit

"You guys need a Chicago-style pizza place here!" I declared when we finished eating. "This was good, but deep dish or pan pizzas are way better!"

"What's the difference?" Per asked.

"Chicago pizzas are about eight times as thick -- thicker crust, which goes up the sides, and way more toppings, like five centimeters thick. You eat it with a knife and fork, usually."

"I could only eat like one piece," Hanna said.

"Me, too, except for if we have it right after karate. Then I can eat two pieces. But it's SO good with lots of gooey cheese and lots of sausage and pepperoni."

"Is everyone finished?" Anna asked. "If so, we should head to Kjell's house for the party!"

Anna and Per paid the bill, then we all got up from the tables and left the restaurant. We took the «Tunnelbana» to Kjell's family's apartment, where his parents had set out all kinds of snacks and drinks, though no alcohol, which was OK with me. His parents had gone out with my dad and moms and Karin's parents, leaving the apartment to the fourteen of us who were going to dance and have fun.

Kjell put a CD in the player and turned up the music. I danced with all the guys, including Nicholas, and had a great time. I thought again about what it might be like to have both Per and Kjell at the same time, but I didn't want to do anything that might bother Kjell because we were basically a couple during this visit.

Jesse had fun dancing with all the girls, and it was obvious that Anna, Freja, and Maja all wanted him again, and I was positive he could have Ester, Sara, and Hannah if he wanted them! That made me rethink what I'd thought before, but in the end, I had promised to sleep in Kjell's bed, and it would be totally awkward to be with one of the other guys.

The party was a blast, and everyone left at midnight, including Jesse, who went back to the hotel. Fortunately, the apartment wasn't a mess because people had been careful, so it only took a few minutes for Kjell and me to straighten up, finishing just before his parents arrived home. We said 'good night' to them, and after brushing our teeth and using the bathroom, Kjell and I went to his room, undressed, and got into bed.



July 21, 2002, Saint Petersburg, Russia

 Steve

"How was your flight?" Vanya asked after he greeted me in the lobby of the Nevskij Palace Hotel on Nevsky Prospect.

"No trouble. SAS was efficient and the car you sent to pick us up was waiting. No trouble with passport control, either, thanks to the ministerial visas."

"Good! All checked in?"

"Yes. Are Yuri and Lyusya here?"

"They'll arrive in about an hour. We'll have dinner at my flat tonight as planned."

"Jesse is eating at the Officer's Mess tomorrow, then spending the rest of the time with Eugen and his friends."

"Do you have other plans?"

"Just sightseeing," I replied. "And spending time together."

"I certainly would, in your position!" he said with a grin. "I do not think Anya would approve!"

"Nor Tanya, which is why she is married to Dima! As we've said, perhaps Jesse and Larisa will unite our families."

"Dima says Jesse has grown into a fine young man! He's sixteen, yes?"

"Yes. He starts his Junior Year of High School."

"Has he decided on a university?"

"He's thinking about the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and he plans to study business."

"If he has your head for business, he'll do wonderfully! Is there anything you need?"

"Not at the moment."

"Good. Then I will send two cars later for you and the others. 5:30pm."

"We'll be ready!"

We shook hands, he left, I went back up to the suite I was sharing with my wives and Jesse.

[Östersund, Sweden]

 Ashley

"What are we doing today?" I asked Anna.

"Dad is taking us to Frösö Zoo," Anna replied. "Kristina will come along, as will three girls from school."

"Cool. How far is it?"

"About fifteen minutes by car on Frösön, an island named for the god Freyr."

"The twin brother of Freyja, right?" I asked.

"Yes! You know Freyr?"

"And Loki, Thor, and Odin! Dad is always talking about Loki messing things up and Birgit blamed him because she kept getting interrupted every time she tried to have sex!"

Anna laughed, "How many times?"

"At least four! It was totally hilarious. Well, for me, not for her!"

"Do you have a boy you like?"

"No. The boys in my class are all stupid, and I'm too young. What about you?"

"There's one boy I know who's in «gymnasiet» who is cute and really sweet, but I only turn twelve next month so there isn't anything I can do."

"Did you get your period?"

"In April. Mom got hers right before she turned twelve, too. You haven't, right?"

"No. Nine would be really young. Mom didn't get hers until she was fourteen. I'm in no hurry!"

"It's a pain in the butt!" Anna agreed. "Especially because mine isn't regular yet. My doctor says that's common."

"Ready to go, girls?" Nils asked, coming into the kitchen.

"Yes!" we both exclaimed.

We left the house and got into Nils' Volvo for the drive to the zoo.

[Leeds, England]

 Albert

"Is there anything special you want to do before you go home?" Amanda asked on Sunday morning.

"No," I said, "but if we could go to London for a day, that would be cool."

"We can do that! Do you have any idea when you'll come back?"

"No, but Doctor Jon said you were making a trip to Chicago sometime next year."

"That's the plan; we just need to work out holiday schedules and coordinate with your dad. Let me check with Jon, and if it's OK, we'll go tomorrow."

"Great!"

"What are you and Jane doing today?"

"Getting together with some of her friends from school at one of their houses. We'll have dinner there. Karen knows."

"OK."

"Albert?" Jane called out. "Are you ready?"

"I'm a guy!" I replied. "We're always ready!"

"That's for sure!" Amanda tittered.

Jane and I left the house, holding hands, and walked to her friends house, which was about ten minutes away. I knew most of the kids because we'd hung out with them before we'd gone to Lisbon for three days. The trip had been fun, but way too short.

"When do you think we'll get married?" Jane asked.

"Probably when I graduate from the Naval Academy," I said. "I'll be twenty-two and you'll be twenty. You can finish your A-levels and then move to the US. I'm sure our dads can work that out."

"You can't marry until you graduate?"

"Correct. They won't accept anyone who is married and you're not allowed to marry until graduation. But that's about the right age, really."

"And we can have our honeymoon early?"

"If you want, yes. When you're old enough."

"Yes, of course! Probably when I'm fifteen or sixteen."

"We'll need to do some planning because of the distance," I said.

"Obviously!"

We arrived at her friend's house, so the conversation about our future would have to wait for, well, the future.

[Saint Petersburg, Russia]

 Steve

"You've finally done it!" Lyusya exclaimed. "No more management, just coding."

"Except for cleaning up a few details with our buyout of Knowles and Jackson, but that's mostly just approving what our legal team is doing."

"I thought that was completed."

"The important part, the VLC division, is; this is the about the Brauns and the remnants of what used to be Lone Star Systems."

"I thought those two jokers were in prison."

"Yes, but they haven't pled guilty or been convicted, and there's a bank involved that Braun pledged the Lone Star intellectual property against. It's all just lawyer games, but I started it, so I have to finish it."

"How are the kids? I haven't really spoken to you in about four months."

"Great! Only Jesse is here with us. Stephe decided to go to Ohio, Matthew and Michael are in Spain with Elyse and Eduardo, Albert is visiting his girlfriend in Leeds, and Birgit and Ashely stayed in Sweden."

"You seem to have added a third wife," Lyusya declared with a smile.

"Just before we left home," I replied.

"Still collecting?"

"No. And dialing back."

Lyusya laughed, "That'll be the day! I know a Russian girl or two who would tempt a dead man!"

"Besides you?" I asked with a grin.

"If Yuri and I weren't married, I'd prove it to you. Again!"

"I have no doubt! Though being due at the end of next month would make that difficult!"

"I wasn't sure they'd let me get on the plane, but Yuri has connections. But the worst part is trying to get comfortable to sleep."

"And in about six weeks, it'll be trying to sleep, period!"

"Ugh!" Lyusya groaned. "Don't remind me!"

"Shall we join the others?"

"Yes!"

[Madrid, Spain]

 Matthew

"All I can say is ask your mom," I said as we got into bed at the hostel in Madrid. "I honestly don't want to know, and no matter what your mom says, please keep it to yourself."

"Why?" Chelsea asked.

"Because it's literally none of our business. And why does it matter?"

"I don't know," Chelsea replied. "It's just weird."

"You realize if it did happen, you weren't even born? It would have been before my dad and my mom met at your mom's wedding, so it's like, ancient history! Just let it go and don't worry about it."

"You're upset."

"No, I'm not upset. I just don't care about who my dad might or might not have had sex with. I only care about you and me, and we've only been with each other and we'll only ever be with each other."

"Will you make love to me?"

"Yes."



July 22, 2002, Saint Petersburg, Russia

A Russian Army lieutenant came into the lobby of the hotel and walked over to me.

"You are Jesse Stepanovich Block?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Lieutenant Kyrylenko. I am tasked with bringing you to «Здание Главного штаба», is Building of General Staff, in English, on behalf of Colonel Dezhnyov. I have car with driver outside. You have passport with you?"

"Yes."

"Then we go."

We left the hotel and got into a military staff car with a sergeant behind the wheel. Neither the officer nor the enlisted man spoke during the drive, except to ask for my passport to show the guard.

"Jesse!" Lieutenant Colonel Konovalov called out as soon as we entered the building. "Welcome!"

"Hi, Colonel!" I said as we shook hands.

"«Лейтенант Кириленко, вы уволены!»" Lieutenant Colonel Konovalov said to the lieutenant.

"«Да, полковник!»" the lieutenant replied, saluting.

"I understand using my rank in front of the lieutenant, but please, during the meal, call me Yuri Anatolyevich."

"By your order, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel!" I said with a grin.

Lieutenant Colonel Konovalov laughed, "You are not one of my soldiers! We are friends! Come, and I'll introduce you to the other officers who will dine with us."

We made our way to the dining room where Colonel Vasily Vladislavovich Dezhnyov was waiting with ten other officers, mostly captains and majors, but one very pretty female lieutenant who I guessed was about twenty-three.

"Jesse Stepanovich, you are a grown man!" Colonel Dezhnyov exclaimed. "You are taller than me! Are you still playing ice hockey?"

"Of course!"

"Let me introduce you to the other officers."

He did, and I tried to remember the names, but the only one that stood out was Svetlana Aleksandrovna Smirnova, who had auburn hair, brown eyes, and a uniform that was filled out in all the right places.

"How did your team do this year?" Colonel Dezhnyov asked after introducing me.

"Not so well. We didn't make it to the finals. We had one bad game, and that's all it took. We lost 1-0 because they had two five-on-three powerplays in the first period."

"Undisciplined play will cause you to lose every time!"

"Tell me about it!" I said, shaking my head. "I was at hockey camp last month and I think I've improved my game, so hopefully will advance past the city finals. I have two more years to win a second championship."

"Let us sit. You can sit next to me, or, if I understand the looks, next to Lieutenant Smirnova!"

I laughed, "I'll sit with you, Vasily Vladislavovich. I can chat up the cute lieutenant later when you're all drinking!"

"Will your father allow you to have some vodka?"

"Yes, but I don't drink."

"A sip or two, perhaps? To drink toasts with your friends?"

"I can do that, yes."

"Good!"

III. You Impudent Whelp

July 22, 2002, Saint Petersburg, Russia

 Jesse

The two sips of vodka burned all the way down. I remembered having tried my dad's bourbon and spitting it out when I was four, and I still didn't like alcohol. Dad, Kurt, and Pete had all said it was an 'acquired taste' and Kurt had said he didn't like bourbon until he was in his twenties. Having drunk the two toasts, I moved to the empty chair next to Lieutenant Smirnova.

"You are ice hockey player, yes?" she asked.

"Yes. Goalkeeper."

"You played in Russia five years ago with American team?"

"I did."

"I see this match! You win in extra time! My brother was forward on team. You prevent him from scoring and he was not happy! I am sure he would wish to meet you! You are in Saint Petersburg for some time?"

"Until Thursday morning."

"If I arrange, you join family for dinner?"

"It would have to be Wednesday evening," I replied. "I have plans tomorrow with my friend Eugen."

"Is German?"

"His father is East German, though his mom is married to a different man now."

"Which hotel do you stay in?"

"Nevskij Palace Hotel on Nevsky Prospect."

"I will arrange with parents and brother. I call tomorrow to give details."

"I'll be out, but if you leave a message for 'Steve Adams', I'll get it. That's my dad, and the suite is in his name."

"I do this! Brother will be happy!"

"Did you go to a military academy?" I asked.

"No. I go to university for computers and apply for commission when I graduate. I am signals officer. What year of school are you?"

"I'm a Junior, which is year eleven."

"The same as brother. You are sixteen or seventeen?"

"Sixteen. My birthday is in February."

"Body of grown man, but still baby!" she teased.

"Young man," I countered. "You have the body of a grown woman, but are a baby compared to my grandpa who is eighty-five!"

"Is old for grandpa to sixteen-year-old. Are you youngest?"

"Eldest," I replied. "Grandpa Adams, my dad's dad, didn't marry until he was forty-five, after serving in the Navy World War II and working for the US government. He was actually in Russia a few times during the war."

"Was on convoy duty?"

"Yes. He was a Chief Petty Officer who served as Chief Radio Man."

"Ah, so signals, like me, but without computers!"

"I don't think there were girls on his destroyer!" I replied.

"You think girls are weak?"

"Not at all! But the US military did not have women in any combat roles in World War II. I know the Soviet Union did."

"We must defend homeland against Fascist scourge! Required everyone fight. Was good to cooperate with USA. What does father do?"

"He runs his own computer software and support company. He does business in Russia through a friend in Moscow."

"And you?"

"College in two years, where I'll study business and play hockey. I'll probably end up working for an NHL team."

"Not player?"

"I'm good, but not that good!" then added with a smirk, "I'm better at other things!"

Lieutenant Smirnova laughed, "Big words! But is normal for man to brag about prowess! Most are liar!"

"Well," I smirked, "there is only one way to find out!"

Lieutenant Smirnova laughed heartily, "Is your way of suggesting I go to bed with teenager?"

"You did say I had the body of a man!" I replied.

"You are funny, Jesse Stepanovich!"

That seemed to me to be a polite way to deflect the flirting, so I changed topics.

"Do you like the Army?"

"Yes. Is good job. Father is mechanic; mother is teacher. What does mother do?"

Given what I knew about Russian views on homosexuality, I decided to follow our usual circumspection.

"She's an electrical engineer. She designs test equipment for vehicle and aircraft systems."

"Married to your father?"

"No. They never married. But we live next door to my dad and his wife and we're all friends."

A bit of obfuscation, but better than creating a scene or causing trouble for my friends «полковник» Dezhnyov and «подполковник» Kononov.

"You have siblings?"

This is where it would get tricky.

"Yes. Three brothers and three sisters. Dad has had relationships in the past where he had kids and didn't marry the woman. But we're all friends and everyone gets along."

"Dad is playboy?"

I laughed, "Some people would say that, yes. But he's a really good dad."

"Are siblings on trip?"

"No. Two of my brothers are with their mom and her boyfriend in Spain, my other brother is visiting his friend in England. Two of my sisters are in Sweden, and the other one is in Cincinnati, Ohio. My mom is visiting Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, with some friends."

"Is very strange arrangement!"

"But it works."

"You have girlfriend?"

"I date, but no steady girlfriend. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No boyfriend, but I have male friends who are both in Army and not in Army."

"Jesse Stepanovich!" Colonel Dezhnyov called out. "Come speak with other officers! Lieutenant, you are monopolizing our guest!"

All the male officers, which meant everyone except Lieutenant Smirnova, laughed hard.

"Sorry, Colonel!" Lieutenant Smirnova said, but her voice was light.

"Leave a message for me about dinner," I said as I got up to move back to a spot near Lieutenant Colonel Konovalov.

"I will!"



July 23, 2002, Saint Petersburg, Russia

"A lieutenant, Svetlana Aleksandrovna Smirnova, will leave a message for me today," I said to Dad at breakfast. "Her brother was a forward on the team we beat in that impromptu overtime five years ago and wants to meet me. I'll have dinner with him and his parents."

"And your dad can have dinner with the lieutenant!" Aunt Kara teased.

"No," Dad replied quickly. "She's Jesse's friend, so that's not going to happen. I made that promise."

"I'm not Birgit," I chuckled. "I'm not procuring!"

"And neither should she," Dad said firmly. "She and I have talked about that, and I'd appreciate it if you remind her if you think she's doing that."

"On it, Pops! Ashley and I have both been trying to help Birgit color inside the lines!"

"Good luck with THAT!" Suzanne said, causing everyone to laugh.

"It's a tough job, but someone has to do it!" I replied.

"Did you drink last night?" Dad asked.

"Two sips of vodka to make «ПОЛКОВНИК» Dezhnyov happy. I still don't like it, but I didn't spit it out and wipe off my tongue!"

Dad and his wives all laughed.

"When were you going to have dinner with them?" Dad asked.

"Tomorrow night, because I'm having dinner with Eugen and his friends tonight. Vera Olegovna made the arrangements for a private room at a restaurant."

"How many young adults?" Dad asked.

I laughed, "Lieutenant Smirnova said I had the body of a grown man, but I was a baby!"

Once again, Dad and his wives laughed.

"What is she?" Dad asked. "About twenty-four?"

"Something like that. She has a degree in computers and is a lieutenant of signals. Anyway, Eugen said there will be about ten besides him and me, mostly guys, but three girls."

"She's picking you up, right?"

"Yes, at 9:00am. We'll go to their flat, then at 10:00am we'll go to the park down the street and play football."

"Soccer, right?" Suzanne asked.

"Yes. You don't hang out with Pete's boys, Albert, Matthew, Michael, Nicholas, and me. We call it football, and the other game either NFL football or gridiron football. But we almost never watch it because it gets dumber every year!"

We finished breakfast and, as planned, Vera Olegovna and Eugen arrived just before 9:00am to take me to their flat.

[Cádiz, Spain]

 Matthew

"I wish we could have stayed longer!" Chelsea said as we packed our bags on Monday morning in preparation for our trip back to Chicago.

"Eduardo couldn't take more time off," I said. "He wanted to, but he has a very big deal brewing with a large company in South America and has to be in Buenos Aires this week and Brasilia next week, and then has to be in Miami."

"I can't believe I start college in a month!"

"And I start tenth grade!"

"When will you know the dates for your plays and musicals?"

"I could get them from Mr. Fruits as soon as we get home. He has to have the schedule for the theater turned in by the end of this month, and I'm sure he has it

done. The only production I know about for sure is *Les Mis* and that will be when I'm a Senior because the amount of planning was just too much to pull it off this year."

"Is Maggie going to be able to participate?"

"I hope so, but her parents aren't exactly rational."

"None of my Catholic friends' parents are crazy that way."

"My Grandma Adams is," I replied. "And I know she and your mom knew each other back in the day. She was at your mom's wedding to Kent, which is where the trouble started."

"I didn't know that."

"I love you Chelsea, and I'd really prefer you didn't stir up what might be a hornet's nest."

"Just by asking my mom?"

"What are you going to do if she admits it?"

"Uhm, I'm not sure."

"Nothing," I said firmly. "You aren't going to do anything. And that's why you shouldn't even ask."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I love you," I said. "And you know I don't put my foot down, but this time I am. You can't do anything or say anything to anyone, no matter what your mom

says, and that includes me. So let it go, don't worry about it, and just be with me. If we can be 'kissing cousins', does it matter what your mom did or didn't do twenty-five years ago?"

"More than kissing!" Chelsea giggled. "Way more!"

"Yes, of course, but we can't advertise that without you, my parents, and Eduardo getting into all kinds of trouble!"

"Old men need to keep their dumb laws off my body!" Chelsea said fiercely.

"In this case, it's on *my* body," I chuckled. "But I agree."

"All packed?" Eduardo asked, coming to the door of our room in the villa.

"Yes," I replied.

"Then let's get things loaded into the taxi."

[Stockholm, Sweden]

 Birgit

"Can I ask you a question about you and my dad?" I asked Karin in Swedish when we were making «kanelbullar», or cinnamon buns.

"You can ask, but I might not be able to answer," she replied, continuing in Swedish.

I laughed, "Not about that! I *know* you did that!"

"What's your question?"

"Dad made a comment about you helping him grow up and implied he was really, hmm, thoughtless, about you."

"Your dad never really recovered from my sister's death until after you were born, and even so, he still hasn't, not completely. I don't blame him for what happened, and if there is any real blame, it's your favorite Norse god who thought it would be amusing to throw our entire lives into chaos."

"The storm?"

"Yes. Did your dad mention that at the exact time there was a terrible thunderstorm in Milford?"

"No! Really?"

"Yes. He felt something terrible had happened, but he had no idea until Melanie told him later that day, after Mom called her. I'm just thankful that Mom called Trudy, rather than your grandmother."

"My grandmother is a...well, something I'm not supposed to say."

"I think the polite words in English are 'piece of work'," Karin replied.

"Yes!" I agreed. "Like the sailors saying 'Sir' to an officer when they mean 'fuck you!'"

"About growing up, well, both your dad and I needed to grow up, but also grieve for my sister. Girls usually mature faster than boys, which I suspect you already know!"

"TELL ME ABOUT IT!" I groused. "Though Kjell seems to do OK. I think it's being Swedish rather than American."

"And you and your sister are very mature, even more than some of the Swedish kids. That's your dad's influence, of course. You can refuse to answer, but do you have questions you need answered?"

I couldn't help but laugh hard.

"I'm the daughter of Steve and Kara Adams! What do *you* think?"

"Never mind!" Karin said, laughing softly. "Maybe I should have Kristian talk to Kjell."

"Got it covered," I giggled. "He does what he's told, like all good boys!"

"And you know that's not the basis for a healthy relationship, right?"

"I do, but it was funny. And the people who should know all say you have to talk about it with each other to make it mind-blowing!"

"I'd question two fourteen-year-olds claiming to have had mind-blowing sex, but, as you said, your parents are Steve and Kara!"

"Tell me your time with my dad wasn't mind-blowing! I dare you!"

Karin laughed softly, "No comment! That's off limits, young lady!"

"Which means yes! Anyway, I heard from Aunt Stephanie that you visited the US a couple of times to try to make things work with my dad."

"I did, and he visited here, but there was just too much baggage, as they say. Your dad and I love each other, and we always will, but we both are in the right relationships."

"Obviously!" I declared. "Because otherwise I wouldn't be here!"

Karin laughed, "Somehow, I think Birgit Adams would have been born exactly the way she is, no matter what happened. Even Loki couldn't have prevented that!"

"Dad does say I'm a force of nature!"

"He's not wrong! May I make a private comment, which you should think about, but not say to anyone?"

"I reserve the right to discuss it with my friend, Katy."

"Of course. You should consider simply accepting a random host family assignment from YFU, rather than request to stay with us."

"Why?"

"Because you'll have much more freedom and not feel obligated to do everything with us. You'll always be welcome here, of course, and we'll see you often, but if you want a full experience, like your dad's, you should simply accept a random placement. Obviously, we'll be happy to have you live with us, but I don't think that would be best."

"Kjell might be upset," I replied.

"Do you think Kjell will join a monastery next week?" Karin asked. "Or you will you join a convent?"

"No chance!"

"Two years from now, you'll both be different and the world will be different, or at least look different to you. Maybe you'll end up a couple, maybe you won't, but I don't see Birgit Elizabeth Adams marrying before she's in her late twenties."

"I want to go to college and have fun! Sure, eventually, I'll want kids, but I'm not marrying in my early twenties the way my mom did, or worse, at eighteen like Matthew will!"

"He and his girlfriend are that serious?"

"Since he was five, though, he didn't know it! She's a few years older. She starts college next month, and he's in tenth grade. But they'll marry as soon as he finishes High School."

"And Albert?"

"I think not until he graduates from the Naval Academy. I don't think you're allowed to be married if you go there. But I want to graduate, get a job, and enjoy being single! Too many boys, not enough time!"

Karin laughed, "You want to be very careful about birth control and STDs."

"Dad and my moms are adamant about it. Kjell went to have a test before we arrived and I'm on «p-pillar»."

"Good. Just remember to always be careful."

"I will!"

[Saint Petersburg, Russia]

 Jesse

We had a fun day playing soccer, eating a picnic lunch, then playing more soccer. Only three of the kids besides Eugen spoke English, and only one of them really well, but that didn't interfere with having a good time, and Eugen and Iosif translated for those who didn't speak English well or at all, and for me, who spoke no Russian, never having learned as I once thought I would.

Late in the afternoon, everyone went home to shower and change, with me going to Eugen's family's flat with him for my shower and a change of clothes. An hour later, the twelve of us met at the restaurant where we had a great time eating, before heading back to Eugen's family's flat to listen to music, dance, and talk.

With only three girls, mostly we all danced as a group, but on slow songs, the girls chose guys to dance with, being nice about it and including everyone, though one girl, Anastasia, made a point of choosing me four times, the last two times in a row. She danced very close, but because she spoke little English, all we could really do was dance, not talk. That was too bad, as she was a striking blonde, about two inches shorter than me, and was the best soccer player except for Eugen and Iosif.

She chose me for a fifth, and last, dance a few minutes before midnight when everyone would leave. The dance was as close as it could possibly be with our clothes on, her body pressed firmly against mine from shoulders to thighs, and her head on my shoulder. It was obvious she was interested, but without speaking the same language, that created a barrier that I wasn't sure how to overcome.

The other concern was something I'd heard 'Lucy Alexa' and Dad discussing, and that was the fact that there was literally zero sex education in Russian schools and that the main form of birth control was abortion. That had floored me, but I hadn't been in a position to ask questions at Vanya's house, and Lyusya had left for Moscow the following morning.

When the song ended Anastasia kissed my cheek, a sure indication I was correct in my assessment about her feelings, but here wasn't really anything I could do because from what I'd seen, she spoke no English, or perhaps a few words picked up from TV or music. She didn't move right away, so I just waited, not sure what to do until she looked up and it was clear she wanted a kiss.

I weighed my options and felt a kiss was safe, so I touched my lips to Anastasia's. As we kissed, she tightened her arms around me and pushed her hips forward, making it abundantly clear what was on her mind, and mine, for that matter. But I had no way of communicating with her. We held the kiss for about twenty seconds, then she sighed deeply and put her head on my shoulder again.

"I stay?" she asked, surprising me.

"You speak English?" I asked, keeping my sentence simple.

She smiled and shrugged, "No English. *Française?*"

I shook my head, "*Español?*" I offered.

She shook her head and at that point, we'd basically exhausted the options. Of the four languages we knew, we didn't have any in common. She released me and went to one of the other girls, Lilia, and spoke to her, then they came over to me. I had heard Lilia speak in broken English, but she'd been understandable and seemed to understand me, so that might be enough to communicate.

"Anastasia, my cousin, say she like you," Lilia said. "You like her?"

But I knew next to nothing about her. Not to mention it being totally strange to have a translator to, in effect, agree to sleep together was just flat-out weird. But she was gorgeous.

"She's very pretty," I said.

Lilia smiled and translated for Anastasia, who answered.

"She say she want to stay with you," Lilia said. "You want?"

I actually had rubbers in my pocket, which I had taken out of an abundance of caution, but that didn't solve the concern about the commitment I'd made to my Dad and my moms about 'safe sex'. And perhaps that was the thing to ask, though I had no idea if they would understand the concept given the lack of sex education in the schools.

"I practice 'safe sex'," I said.

"What means 'safe sex'?" Lilia asked, confirming my suspicions.

"Using birth control and taking precautions against diseases."

That led to a short conversation between the girls.

"Baby is no risk," Lilia said. "And I know she never so no risk of disease."

I was in what my Aunt Stephanie called 'Luckiest Dumb Boy' territory when talking about my dad, but saying 'no risk' about getting pregnant made me wonder just what was meant. And being a virgin didn't mean no diseases, as they could come via medical procedures.

"You can get diseases from medical procedures," I said. "Surgery or blood transfusion."

"She not have those, I am sure. She is cousin, so I know."

"What does 'no risk' mean about a baby?"

"If she get pregnant, she have abortion. Is normal in Russia."

A frank admission like that actually floored me. While I agreed with my dad that abortions ought to be legal, using them as birth control bugged me. In a sense, it wasn't her fault, given what I'd heard at dinner on Sunday night, but that didn't make it any less wrong in my mind.

"I have condoms," I said. "It's foolish to risk pregnancy."

"Is no big deal in Russia," Lilia said. "Is free and nobody ask questions."

I decided to let it go, because it was a cultural difference I wasn't going to be able to bridge, but one that didn't matter much, so long as I used condoms. And I trusted the statement that Anastasia was a virgin and had no medical procedures. But that didn't solve perhaps the biggest impediment -- we couldn't talk.

"We don't have a common language," I said. "So we can't talk."

Lilia translated for Anastasia, who replied, and both girls laughed.

"She say she not want to stay to talk!" Lilia declared.

I laughed, though I had one more question before I decided what to do.

"I need to make sure it's OK with Eugen," I said.

"Is OK," Lilia said. "Anastasia ask him last time they dance and he say it OK."

I was out of objections, so to speak, and it was a question of what I wanted to do. I almost laughed because the idea of fooling around with a sexy, blonde fifteen-year-old Russian virgin as so tempting as to make it difficult to say 'no', though without rubbers I absolutely would have, because there was no way I was going to rely on abortion as birth control. Rubbers did have risks, but I knew how to use them and I was careful. Before I could answer, Anastasia said something to Lilia, who translated.

"She say she sure tall, handsome American hockey player is excellent choice for first lover."

I glanced over to Eugen, who smiled, rolled his eyes, and nodded.

"OK," I said.

"If you need, I with Eugen tonight," Lilia said.

And suddenly, it all made more sense. Lilia had her night planned, and I suspected if I'd said 'no', then Lilia and Anastasia would have left together, defeating Lilia's plan. The other guests left, saying goodbye, with several of them giving me Russian-style hugs and kisses on the cheek. The girls went to use the bathroom, then Eugen and I went into brush our teeth.

"How long have you and Lilia been dating?"

Eugen laughed, "Never! She asked to stay the night!"

"Interesting."

"I think it was after Anastasia said she was interested in you, am I'm certainly not going to object if that's why!"

"You're using birth control, right?" I asked.

"I have condoms. Jaako insisted."

"Smart," I replied. "What's the problem here?"

"Between the Orthodox Church and the prudish Communists, there was no sex education. Jaako says it's very different in Finland."

"And in Sweden, and the US, though ours is nowhere near as good as Sweden's."

"Almost no girls here take pills," Eugen said. "Jaako says about half, or even more, do in Finland."

"That's true in Sweden, too. Not so much in the US, though the girls I hang out with do because they all read a book by a friend of our family's."

"I think your dad tried to send one to my mom, but it was confiscated by customs."

I just shook my head at the stupidity, finished brushing my teeth, used the toilet, washed my hands, then went to the guest bedroom where Anastasia was in bed and under the covers. There was a night light, so I turned off the lamp, walked over to the nightstand and put the rubbers and my wallet there, then undressed and got into bed.



July 24, 2002, Saint Petersburg, Russia



Jesse

Anastasia and I hadn't talked, but that hadn't prevented her from crying out in pleasure multiple times, both from my mouth and from screwing. I'd really enjoyed having sex with her, but it felt weird not being able to talk. We had slept spooned together, and in the morning we shared the small shower stall before drying off, dressing, and joining Eugen, Lilia, Vera, and Jaako for breakfast. Much like Swedish parents, neither Vera nor Jaako even blinked at the fact that Eugen and I had girls spend the night.

After breakfast, when the girls were about to leave, Anastasia came over to me, put her arms around me, and gave me a soft kiss.

"«Спасибо!»" she said when she broke the kiss. "I like."

I knew the response in Russian to 'thank you', so I used it.

"«Пожалуйста!»," I replied. "I liked it, too."

She kissed me again, then she and Lilia left. When I sat down to have some coffee, Eugen's mom came over.

"She speaks no English," Vera said quietly.

"The language of love is international!" I chuckled.

"Yes, clearly!" Vera said. "She's a sweet girl. Her father is a policeman."

I groaned, "NOW you tell me!"

Vera laughed, "Fifteen is OK in Russia."

"Yes, but dads do not necessarily agree!"

"True, though I am sure she and Lilia said they were staying in the guest room. I was surprised to see Lilia stay with Eugen."

"Mom!" Eugen protested, coming into the room.

"What are you doing today?"

"Going to stores so Jesse can find some gifts to take home," Eugen said.

"OK. I'm leaving for the museum and Jaako has to be at the power company. Jesse, it was good to see you! Please visit again!"

"All of you are welcome in Chicago, too."

She hugged me, kissed my cheeks, and after Jaako and I shook hands, they left the flat.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Matthew

Can we go to your dad's house?" Chelsea asked when we woke up very late on Wednesday morning.

"Mirrors?" I asked.

"And the sauna! I think only Natalie is there now, right?"

"Possibly Estrella, too," I replied. "She might be at Alejandra's in Minnesota, but I'm not sure. What about getting together with Mark and Maggie?"

"Call them and plan for tomorrow," Chelsea said. "I'm still tired and I want to use the sauna naked. You know Maggie won't."

"True, though as rebellious as she's feeling about her parents, you never know."

"Your fantasy?" Chelsea asked, but her voice was light.

"For your eyes only, Darling!" I replied.

Chelsea laughed, "Clarke. Matthew Clarke."

"Cooler, but without all the women!" I replied.

We got out of bed and took a quick shower together, ate lunch, then left Eduardo's townhouse for my dad's house. Nobody was home when we arrived, so I let myself in with the key I had, and we went right to the sauna. After the sauna, we went to the guest room, uncovered the mirror, and fooled around for a few hours.

"Hi!" Natalie exclaimed when we walked out into the kitchen. "I wondered who was here, but it basically had to be you two because everyone else is gone until tomorrow when Albert comes home. Estrella is in Minnesota, but she'll be back tomorrow, too. How was Spain?"

"Awesome!" I replied.

"We made love on the beach under the stars!" Chelsea exclaimed.

"Romantic!" Natalie exclaimed. "What else did you do?"

"We were beach bums most of the time," I replied. "But we did go to Madrid for a couple of days to see the city. How were things here?"

"Quiet! Josie and Jennifer were gone until yesterday, so it was just me at the Compound. My sister and Mikey visited a few times, along with some other friends, but no parties. Do you two want dinner?"

"Sure," I agreed.

"OK. I'll make enough for three!"

"Great!"

[Saint Petersburg, Russia]

 Jesse

When Svetlana arrived to pick me up early Wednesday evening, she was not in uniform, and looked incredibly sexy in tight-fitting jeans and a form-fitting shirt with her hair tied back instead of in a bun.

"Hi, Lieutenant Simonova," I said, despite her not being in uniform.

"Call me Svetlana or Sveta," she said, greeting me with a hug and quick kiss on the cheek, more as we did in the US than the way Russians did it. "I have car out front."

We left the hotel, got into her car, and just over ten minutes later, walked into her parents' flat in a tall apartment block.

"Jesse Stepanovich, my brother Andrei Fyodorovich," Svetlana said when her brother met us just inside the door.

"Hi," I said, and shook his offered hand.

"Hi!" he replied. "You are good goalkeeper!"

"Thanks! I remember how hard your shots were!"

"You stopped!" he groused. "But was great game!"

We walked into the large room that served as a combination living room and dining room, but wasn't big enough for me to call it a 'great room'.

"Jesse Stepanovich," Svetlana said, "My father, Fyodor Ivanovich, and my mother Irina Maximovna."

They each greeted me in Russian style.

"Welcome," Irina said. "We speak some English, but Andrei and Sveta speak much better."

"Thank you for your hospitality," I said.

"Is good thing to do!" Fyodor said. "Continues friendship from hockey game!"

"Are you still playing for same team?" Andrei asked.

"No. I play for my High School team now. I'm the starting goalkeeper. What about you?"

"For a different team, but still start as forward. I," he turned to Svetlana and said something in Russian.

"Lead the league in scoring," Svetlana said. "He has most goals of anyone by far! Twelve more than next player."

"I think I'm glad we played five years ago!" I replied.

"Your new team win?" he asked.

"Two school years ago we were city champions; last school year we lost in the semi-finals. Hopefully we'll win again this year and next but we had a lot of players graduate and go to university."

I used that word because everyone in Sweden had used it rather than college.

"And you?" Fyodor asked.

"I want to go to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I hope to play hockey, and I'll study business so I can work for an NHL team in the front office or as a scout or coach."

"I join Army to play on their team!" Andrei said. "Come see my medals!"

Went to his room where he had display case with trophies and medals going back to when he would have been five, given he was my age. In case I saw a picture of him shooting at me in overtime, a shot I'd turned away.

"Cool picture!" I said.

"Better if puck is in net!" he declared. "Better for me!"

"Those games were all a lot of fun," I said. "I was very lucky to play them."

"How is pretty blonde girl?" he asked with a grin.

I laughed, "Nicole is fine. She's playing for her High School and is dating Mikey, the forward there at the edge of the photo."

"She has boyfriend? Too bad! Pretty girl who plays hockey is perfect girlfriend!"

"The girl I spend most time with plays softball. She's a pitcher."

"Softball?"

"It's like baseball, but they use a bigger ball and pitch slower. It's the game girls play instead of baseball."

"Here we have football. Girl I like is midfielder. She is fourteen. Her father not want her to have boyfriend."

"You're sixteen, right?"

"Yes. You are how old?"

"Sixteen. The girl back home is eighteen."

"She is, how do you say, last year of school?"

"Senior? No. She graduated. She starts university next month in Arizona."

"Is far away from Chicago?"

"Yes."

"Too bad. What team do you like?"

"The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim," I replied.

He laughed, "Such silly names! Ducks! Penguins! I like Red Wings!"

"Red Army West," I chuckled. "For all the Russian players they've brought in -- Kuznetsov, Bykov, Larionov, Datsyuk, and of course, Sergei Fedorov."

"Yes! You know all players in league?"

"Lots of them. I've met quite a few, including Wayne Gretzky."

"Is true? You meet Gretzky?"

"Yes."

"Would like to meet! And from Penguins, Mario Lemieux!"

"I've met him, too," I said. "My dad has friends who arranged that."

"I must visit you in Chicago!" Andrei declared.

"You're welcome to visit any time!"

"I will tell father! See what he says."

Irina called out in Russian and Andrei answered her.

"Mother says dinner is ready."

We went to the table and sat down with Fyodor, Irina, and Svetlana, and dug into a rich casserole with noodles, meat, and gravy, along with mashed potatoes. There was also bread with butter. We talked about ice hockey, school, and the differences between Russia and the US. They, like every other Russian I had met, liked Americans and wanted a good relationship between the two countries.

Dima and Tanya had always said that the US and Russia should be natural allies, and that the Russian people and American people had a great affinity for each other, and that it was 'foolish old men' who had created the distrust and enmity. I wondered how things would go under Vladimir Putin, who I'd met during the tournament. If the treatment I was receiving was anything to go by, the future looked bright.

Dessert was a rich cake, and I was glad I'd had so much exercise the previous day, and I'd need to find time to get some after our flight back to Sweden. My dad and his wives were getting on a train to Göteborg basically straight from the plane, but I was going to Anna's house. She ran for exercise, and I was sure we could run together, in addition to more interesting ways of burning calories.

"Jesse Stepanovich, will you have one drink with us?" Fyodor asked.

"Yes," I agreed.

Svetlana must have said something to him in advance, as he only poured about a third of a shot for me, while filling everyone else's glass completely.

"To ice hockey, good friends, America, and Russia!" Fyodor said.

We all downed our vodka, and it burned from lips to stomach, but I was determined to not show it. I'd never been drunk, and decided it would have to feel better than sex to be worth drinking vodka regularly, and I didn't think there was any chance of that being true.

After the vodka, Irina served coffee, and we chatted for close to an hour before it was time for Svetlana to take me back to the hotel. I thanked my hosts, we exchanged addresses and phone numbers, I was invited to return, and I invited them to visit. I shook hands with Andrei, received Russian hugs and kisses from his parents, thanked them once again, then left with Svetlana.

"You are fine young man, Jesse Stepanovich," Svetlana said when we were in the car.

"An upgrade!" I chuckled.

"Upgrade?" she asked.

"On Monday it was 'baby!'"

"You are still baby!" she teased.

I was positive it was all in good fun, given she was seven years older, and in the Army, but I enjoyed teasing and flirting, so I decided to crank it up a notch.

"You're welcome to test that theory by coming to my room with me!" I chuckled.

"And father?"

"Will say 'good night' and 'have fun!'" I chuckled.

"And you think a lieutenant in the Russian Army could be satisfied by a sixteen-year-old American boy?"

"I'm positive!" I declared smugly.

"As I say, all men brag about prowess!"

"It's not bragging if you can back it up!" I declared.

"You are very bold, Jesse Stepanovich!"

"What's the worst thing that could happen?" I asked. "You say 'good night' and go home and dream about what it would have been like! And regret missing a mind-blowing experience!"

"You impudent whelp!" she exclaimed mirthfully.

She pulled up in front of the hotel and stopped.

"I can't leave without a proper Russian goodbye," I said.

Svetlana laughed, put the car in park, and we got out. She walked around the car, we hugged and kissed each other on both cheeks, but I didn't let go right away. Svetlana didn't try to move and when she looked in my eyes, I planted a soft kiss on her lips.

"I will park car," she said.

I smiled and nodded and stepped up onto the sidewalk to wait for her.

IV. Age of Frustration

July 24, 2002, Saint Petersburg, Russia

 Steve

"Dad, this is Lieutenant Svetlana Aleksandrovna Smirnova of the Russian Army," Jesse said when he walked into the suite with a beautiful Russian girl. "Svetlana Aleksandrovna, my dad, Stephen Rayevich Adams."

"«Добрый вечер, товарищ лейтенант!»" I said. ("Good evening, Comrade Lieutenant!")

That was the correct Soviet form of address, and I wasn't sure it was proper now, but it was close enough.

"«Добрый вечер! Ты говоришь по-русски?» she responded. ("Good evening! Do you speak Russian?")

I shook my head, "Only about two dozen words. What is your assignment, Lieutenant?"

"Signals. I have degree in computers."

"I should introduce you to my business partner, Lyudmila Alekseyevna," I said. "She runs a similar company to mine here in Russia."

"Perhaps when I leave Army," she said.

"We're going to my room," Jesse said.

"Good night, then," I said.

They went into Jesse's room in the suite and I heard the door lock after he'd shut it tight.

"No way!" Jessica said, *sotto voce*, shaking her head.

"That's my boy!" I declared equally quietly.

"She has to be twenty-three or twenty-four!" Jessica replied.

"So?" I asked. "The age of consent is fifteen, and she's smoking hot! If Jesse can talk her out of her uniform, more power to him!"

"She's not wearing a uniform in case you didn't notice!" Suzanne interjected.

"Oh, I noticed," I declared. "But I guarantee you this is the end result of Jesse flirting with her starting Monday night!"

"That kid is a menace, just like you were!" Jessica teased.

"I had no complaints except from fathers offended by their daughter's declaration of bodily autonomy. Well, and from my mom about my «некультурный» behavior!"

"And girls who you refused, like Michelle Bateman!" Kara tittered. "And don't forget 'Fuck you, Steve Adams!'"

"That one I rectified," I replied. "Repeatedly!"

"We should probably go into our room and turn on some music," Jessica suggested.

"Don't want to hear the Lieutenant screaming out in throes of passion?" I asked.

"No!"

"How about you make US scream out in throes of passion?" Kara suggested.

"That I can do!"

 Jesse

"Which of beautiful women is wife?" Svetlana asked.

"All of them!" I replied.

"You are goofball! Only allowed in Muslim countries!"

"Only one is his legal wife, but the four of them consider themselves married to each other."

"You are joking!"

I shook my head, "No, I'm not. The two older ones have been married to Dad since December 1985. The three of them added Suzanne to the marriage a few weeks ago, just before our trip. The prettiest one, who was sitting to my dad's right, is his senior wife, and she's the mother to two of my sisters. The one on his left is his legal wife and is mother to a brother and sister."

"I cannot believe! They are ḥarīm?"

"A full professor of chemistry who is a well-known researcher, an Attending physician at the University of Chicago hospital, and a pre-law student."

"Is crazy!"

"That describes my entire life, including having a beautiful lieutenant of the Russian Army in my room!"

"If you do not live up to bragging, I shoot you with sidearm!"

"There's no place to hide it in those clothes!" I said with a grin.

"I come back tomorrow in uniform! You get your 'nine grams! And not in back of head!"

"Then I suppose I shall have to outperform! I do have an important question. Have you been tested for sexually transmitted diseases?"

"Why such question?" she asked.

"One of my dad's firm rules is ensuring a partner doesn't have an STD."

"I had test in May because doctor recommended because I had many lovers in university. It showed no disease."

"Do I need to use rubbers?" I asked. "I have them."

"I am not ignorant teenager and began pills during university."

I moved over to my suitcase, unzipped the pocket, and took out something I'd brought in case I wanted to mess with my Army friends. I pinned the general's stars to my shirt collars, then turned to Svetlana.

"Lieutenant," I said as gruffly as I could, "Strip!"

She started laughing so hard she bent over and held her stomach. It took her a minute to recover, but when she did, she quickly undressed, and I admired her toned body, nice breasts, muscular legs, and a narrow strip of pubic hair which ended just above her plump labia.

"What are your orders, General?" she asked with a silly smile.

"To pleasure each other all night!"

"More big talk!"

"Then get into bed, and I'll prove it!" I said as I began taking off my clothes.

"Jesse, why Russian soldiers cross?" she asked as I removed my shirt.

"I'm Orthodox," I replied.

"You attend church ceremonies?"

"Yes, almost every week since I was little."

"Father is Orthodox? Or mother?"

"Neither," I replied. "Dad was on his spiritual journey and took me to church. I liked it and decided to keep going. Eventually I was baptized and chrismated."

"I have been to church service once, with grandmother. Was interesting, but I do not believe in God. Do you know what cross says on back?"

"Yes. It says 'Let God arise and let his enemies be scattered' in Church Slavonic."

"Many soldiers wear cross, even if they do not go to church ceremonies. Is like, talisman, I think is called."

"Something that is meant to protect them."

"Yes. So, you have cross like soldier. Let us see what you have in way of firepower!"

I laughed, removed the rest of my clothes, then got into bed.



July 25, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Ashley

Kristina and I were sharing a hotel room, and when we woke up on Thursday morning, we showered, then joined Katt and Elin for breakfast. The ice skating competition would begin on Friday and would end on Sunday afternoon. Elin was confident she'd win a medal and felt she had a good chance of winning. Mikael hadn't taken the train with us, because he had to work, but he'd fly down to join us on Friday evening.

"It's just practice today," Katt said to Kristina. "So you and Ashley can spend the day however you like, and we'll have dinner together at 7:00pm. I'll give you some money for lunch and snacks. Ashley, do you have money?"

"Yes," I replied. "Dad made sure I had plenty."

"Are you going to see your parents today?" Katt asked.

"No. They're going straight from the airport to the train station so they can get to Göteborg before it gets late."

When we finished breakfast, Kristina and I left the hotel.

"Let's go to Skansen," Kristina said. "There's a zoo and lots of other things to see there."

"OK," I agreed. "It's so cool that we can be out alone together and not have adults freak out!"

"Mom says that parents in the US are overprotective and treat even teenagers like babies."

"SO true! Some of Jesse's friends who are in High School have less freedom than I do, and way less than you have here."

"It'll be cool if you come to live with us for a year! We can have so much fun!"

"I know! But it's still four years away."

"Do you think you might come back before then?"

"I hope so! You could come visit the US."

"I want to! Maybe next summer?"

"I'm sure my dad will be OK with that!"

"Cool! I'll talk to my mom and dad!"

We grabbed each other's hand and started down the sidewalk.

[Saint Petersburg, Russia]

 Jesse

"Am I going to be shot?" I asked with a smirk when Svetlana and I got into the shower.

"No!" she said. "You are very virile! And an expert lover! You have been granted postponement of execution."

"Thank you!" I said, laughing. "You are a fun, enthusiastic partner!"

"I forget that teenage boys can do it so many times! And so quick to recover! But you also have stamina!"

"Practice makes perfect!" I declared.

"You have had many lovers?" she asked as I began soaping her body.

"About two dozen," I replied.

"You are joking! You are sixteen!"

"And?" I asked.

"Is crazy! I thought seven was many! Well, you are number eight! And first younger! Am I oldest?"

"Not even close," I chuckled.

"You are joking!"

"No. My first was thirty-five."

"What?!" Svetlana gasped.

"I had a very good teacher!" I declared. "Were you ever with a much older guy?"

"Yes, but only by eight years, and was when I was nineteen. Your parents are OK with this?"

"Yes. Dad allows us to make our own decisions and run our own lives. As I said, I'm no baby!"

"I agree! You are expert, powerful lover who can please me!"

"And in two hours, I leave for the airport."

"If you come back to Russia, you must let me know!"

"I promise!"

I finished soaping her and after she rinsed off, she soaped my body.

"Oops," she said impishly. "I spent too much time on this part!"

I'd become hard and once I rinsed off the soap, Svetlana took care of her 'mistake' and we shared a fierce French kiss before getting out of the shower. We dried off, dressed, then went out to the main room.

"Join us for breakfast?" Dad asked.

"Thank you, but I must get to office," Svetlana said.

"I'll walk you to your car," I offered.

We left the room and took the elevator to ground floor, then I walked her around the corner to where she was parked.

"I am glad I met you, Jesse Stepanovich!"

"And I, you, Svetlana Aleksandrovna!"

"I hope you visit again soon!"

"Me, too!"

We hugged and exchanged Russian-style kisses because we were in public. She got into her car, waved, then drove off.

[Leeds, England]

 Albert

"I'm going to miss you!" Jane declared, as I packed my things for my trip home.

"I'll miss you, too! And we'll see each other when you come to the US."

"But it's a year away, at least," she said, sounding sad.

I took her in my arms and hugged her.

"We'll talk on the phone, send emails, and time will go really fast. And you know Dad will let me visit whenever I want, so long as it doesn't interfere with school."

"And your mom? Is she still worried when you travel alone?"

"Yes, but not as much as she used to. The thing that worries her is me flying a plane by myself when I have to fly solo for my license."

"Is that dangerous?"

"Not really. Commander Shaughnessy has done a good job of training me, and I'll also take formal lessons from an instructor starting when I'm sixteen. If you follow the checklists and don't violate the safety rules, it really is very safe."

"Could you fly here?"

"Eventually, when I had the necessary licenses and training, but by then I'll most likely be at the Naval Academy."

"Is it for sure that they'll let you fly jets?"

"No, but I'll have every possible advantage in receiving that assignment."

"What would you do if not?"

"Anything that would let me advance to command," I replied.

"Submarines?"

"No, I'd really prefer a surface ship assignment, and preferably an aircraft carrier. There are so many good roles and so much varied training on a carrier."

"Maybe you could be assigned to Hawaii!" Jane exclaimed. "That would be cool!"

"Nine years from now, we'll find out! But the most important thing that will happen is we'll get married the day after graduation!"

"Yes!" Jane exclaimed.

I zipped my suitcase, padlocked the zippers, then carried it to the front door.

"Ready to go?" Jane's dad asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's be on our way!"

[Stockholm, Sweden]

 Birgit

"How was Russia?" I asked when Jesse arrived at the Kjellson's apartment.

"Great! I had a blast with my Army friends, a great time with Eugen and his friends, and then dinner with a guy who played against us when I was here for the hockey trip."

"And?" I asked with a smirk.

"And I had a very good time!"

I laughed, because that meant Jesse had found a girl, or maybe even two.

"Made some new friends?" I asked.

"Andrei, the hockey forward," Jesse replied.

He was clearly not going to say anything more, but I suspected that was because Kjell was in the room.

"Did Dad and the moms go straight to the train station as planned?" I asked.

"Yes. I chose not to go. I'm going to Anna's. That was no big deal because dad could still cancel the additional room when I decided before we went to Russia."

"Maja is having a get-together at her house tomorrow night," I said. "You're obviously invited. Anna is invited, so I suspect she told Maja you'd be there."

"Cool. I'm going to get something to eat, then leave. I take it your parents are at work, Kjell?"

"Yes."

He made himself a pair of open-faced sandwiches in Swedish style, washed them down with Sprite, then put what he needed in his backpack, stowed his suitcase in the spare bedroom with mine, and left for Anna's house via «Tunnelbana» and bus.

[Göteborg, Sweden]

 Steve

"No Jesse?" Pia asked in Swedish when she met us at Göteborg's Centralstationen.

"Which would you rather do?" I replied in Swedish, "hang out with your parents and their friends or hang out with a bunch of horny teenagers?"

Pia laughed, "So like father like son?"

"Pretty much!"

We switched to English so as not to exclude my wives.

"I have my Volvo wagon just around the corner. Marta is waiting by the car."

"Is she going to be upset that Jesse isn't here?" I asked as we started walking.

"I honestly don't know. She's been strange about him since our visit to Chicago."

"Jesse mentioned that. How is Harry?"

"Good, but he's in London this week. It wasn't planned, but his boss sent him to solve a problem with a supplier. Everything is set for tomorrow at the park across from where Torbjörn used to live. The Katsaroses and Sundströms will meet you for a late dinner at the hotel in about an hour."

"Thanks for helping arrange everything."

"You're welcome!"

Fifteen minutes later, we were at the reception desk at Hotel Vasa on Viktoriagatan. I handed over my credit card, received four keys, and the bellman escorted us to our suite. We all chose to change clothes before dinner, as we'd basically gone from plane to train to car. Once we were all dressed, the three of us went down to the hotel dining room and were seated at a reserved table. A few minutes later, Costas, Anne-Marie, Håkan, and Inger arrived. We all got up to greet them with hugs.

"The kids all abandoned you?" Costas asked.

"The parents are good for funding their travel, but not much else!" I declared.

"So not true and you know it!" Håkan declared.

"Do you see them here?" I asked rhetorically, and with a silly smile. "Nope! They're with their friends! And that's OK, because we want them to be independent."

"So, they get what your parents denied you?" Håkan asked. "At least until you came to Sweden."

"Pretty much," I replied. "And that trip showed me how it ought to be done, with you four setting very good examples."

"I'm not sure the kids would agree," Costas said. "At least not about everything."

"You could ask Jesse or Birgit if they were here about that!" I replied.

"Perhaps in August," Costas said. "We just arranged with Sofia to visit, and Frederick, Maj, and Esther will join us."

"We'd love for you to join us for dinner, at least once," I said. "And I'll make sure all the kids as there."

"We'd love to!" he replied.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Albert

"Hi, Grandpa!" I exclaimed when I walked out the security doors with the pretty stewardess from British Airways.

"Hi, Albert! Miss, I'm Doctor Albert Barton, Albert's grandfather."

"May I see your ID, please?" she asked.

Grandpa showed her his ID.

"Thank you, Doctor Barton," she said. "Albert, you were a pleasure to have onboard today! Please fly with British Airways in the future!"

"Thank you!" I said, handing her the lanyard with the ID badge I'd had to wear.

She left to return through security, and Grandpa and I wheel my cart out of the International Terminal at O'Hare.

"So annoying," I groused as soon as we were outside in the parking lot.

"It grates on you that they require you to have an escort," Grandpa said. "But not every thirteen-year-old is as mature and as capable as you are."

"Then let the escort them kids who can't make their beds, do their laundry, fly airplanes, and get from London to Leeds by themselves!"

"In two years, you won't have to worry about it! How was England?"

"Jolly and old!" I replied.

"And Sweeney?"

"He didn't serve any meat pies, so there's that!"

"I spoke to him this morning, and he mentioned they're planning a trip here next year."

"That's what Amanda said, but she didn't know when."

We walked up to Grandpa's Lexus, and he opened the trunk so I could put my suitcase, backpack, and gym bag into the trunk.

"He's thinking summer, but it could be Christmas. He and Karen need to arrange their schedules."

We got into the car, and I buckled in before answering.

"If it's Christmas," I said, "Jane will be sad because it's so long," I observed. "If that's when it ends up being, I'll probably want to visit her next summer."

"I think your dad and mom might be able to scrape together enough to buy you a ticket," Grandpa Al said as he backed out of the parking spot.

I laughed because Mom made a lot of money as a senior Attending at the hospital, and Dad's business was doing really well.

"He might!" I agreed.

A minute later, Grandpa paid for parking and we headed towards Hyde Park.



July 26, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Jesse

"Your dad did not seem happy," I said to Anna after we ate breakfast with her parents on Friday morning.

"He thinks I'm too young to have an overnight guest," Anna replied. "Mom made the point that it has to be up to me, and that I'm fifteen, which was why she said

it was OK to invite you. She also knew what I planned to do on the camping trip."

"Is it going to be a problem?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Anna replied. "Once it's done, it's done, if you know what I mean."

"All the Swedish parents I've met have been mellow about it, mostly," I observed.

"Dad was actually raised going to church, and has some old-fashioned ideas. I haven't been to church since my confirmation, and before that, it was when I was baptized. Why do you wear a cross? Are you a believer, or is it a tradition in your family?"

"I'm Russian Orthodox and attend services regularly."

"But you don't have old-fashioned ideas!"

"Let's just say that the Church's teachings about sex are not compatible with how I believe we should live our lives. I like the rituals and the prayers, and I do believe that God exists, and that Jesus is His Son, and with most of what they teach about the world."

"None of my friends attend church except for weddings, confirmations, or baptisms. Very few people in Sweden do more than that."

"A lot of Americans go to church every week, sometimes more than once a week."

"What did you want to do today?" Anna asked. "We don't have to be to Maja's until 7:00pm."

"I'll leave that up to you," I said.

"Let's spend the day in Gamla Stan and Skansen."

"Sounds good!"

 Birgit

"Hi, Ashley!" I exclaimed when we met at the ice rink to watch Elin's first skating routine.

"Hi!" she replied. "Having fun with Kjell?"

"Loki is no longer in control!" I giggled. "Finally!"

"So you'll be less frustrated now?" Ashley asked with a silly smile.

"Only about that!" I exclaimed.

"Where is he?" Ashley asked.

"Bathroom. Where's Kristina?"

"Same."

"What did you do yesterday?"

"Kristina and I hung out. What about you?"

"We hung out with some of Kjell's friends. Jesse is staying with Anna, the girl he went camping with."

"Of course he is! What are you doing later?"

"Kjell's friend Maja is having a party. What about you?"

"Going to dinner with Katt and Elin, then going to the movies."

"What are you going to see?"

"*Spider-Man*"

Kjell and Kristina showed up at about the same time, and we went to find our seats. Elin was the fourth girl to skate and did a great job, scoring enough points that she had a good chance to earn a medal. We watched the rest of the girls, then Ashley, Kristina, Kjell, and I all went to lunch.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Matthew

"How are things with your parents?" I asked Maggie when she and Mark arrived at my dad's house.

"Challenging," Maggie replied. "They'll let me be in drama, but they have to approve each production for me to actually participate."

"Everything should be cool," I said. "I called Mr. Fruits yesterday, and he has *The Music Man*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Crucible*, and one he wrote himself, but it doesn't have any 'sexual themes'. He got a lot of pressure about the things that caused your parents to wig out."

"I know my pastor called the principal."

"Religious people need to just butt out!" I replied. "Sorry, you know what I mean."

Maggie laughed, "Yes, of course. You don't see me agreeing with them, do you?"

"No. I have no doubt you sincerely believe, but you don't push it on anyone else. I know if I ask you, you'll tell me, which is how it should be."

"What are we doing today?" Mark asked.

"Whatever you guys want," I replied. "Chelsea and I are cool with anything. Nobody is here except Natalie and Albert, and Albert is going to hang out with his friends. I'm not sure what Natalie is doing."

"How about the Art Museum and Shedd Aquarium?" Maggie suggested.

"Sounds good to me," I replied. "Chelsea?"

"Yes!"

[Göteborg, Sweden]

 Steve

My wives and I took the #2 «spårvagn» to the park across from Torbjörn's former apartment to meet our friends. Elizabeth and Lasse, who had organized things, were the first to arrive with their daughter, Johanna, who was just under a year old. I was happy they'd overcome their difficulties and were together again, having married once Johanna was born.

Many of my friends from my trip in 1980 were there, but several were missing, including Torbjörn, who was in Switzerland and couldn't leave his ailing wife. I

was very happy to see Suzana, Karl, and their two kids, Henrik and Lena, as well as Suzanne Fjällman and her husband, Jakob, and their son, Sven.

Helge, who I hadn't heard from in years, arrived late in the afternoon. He traveled extensively in Asia as an IT Consultant, making good use of the Chinese courses he'd had when we attended Schillerska together. We spent some time talking about NIKA and I encouraged him to get in touch with Lyusya in Moscow if and when he was ready to change jobs.

Ultimately, about half my former class and their families showed up at one point or another, with most staying for the picnic dinner at 5:00pm. The gathering ended just after 8:00pm and after everyone had said 'goodbye, my wives and I headed back to the hotel for a quiet evening together.



July 27, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Jesse

"I was surprised you didn't go with Maja last night," Anna said when we woke up on Saturday morning.

"It just didn't seem right given I came to the party with you and I was planning to go home with you."

"She was really disappointed, but I know I said I was OK with it, but I'm glad you didn't."

"Which is exactly why I didn't. I've really enjoyed spending time with you, and I don't just mean sleeping in the same bed."

"Me, too! It's too bad you don't live here, because I'd be happy to have a cool, handsome hockey player as a boyfriend!"

"I certainly wouldn't mind playing hockey here," I replied. "It would be similar to playing in Canada, and would probably help my game, but I don't see my family moving here! My sisters want to be exchange students, but Chicago is home, and I really like it, even if people there are more uptight."

"Could you sleep over with a girlfriend? Or have her sleep over with you?"

"I could, if there were parents who would allow it. And I don't know any who would. Well, that's not quite true; some of my dad's friends would, but their daughters are way too young. But none of the girls from school or church."

"There's an advantage to being here! Sex is awesome, but sleeping in the same bed afterwards makes it even better! Are you able to stay Monday night?"

"Yes. We need to be at Arlanda at 11:00am on Tuesday to check in, and so long as I meet my family at the InterContinental Hotel by 8:00am, there will be plenty of time."

"Cool! Two more nights together!"

"I'm looking forward to it!"

 Birgit

Dad and my moms arrived back in Stockholm late on Saturday morning, and after they checked into the hotel, they met us at the ice rink to watch Elin's afternoon skate.

"How was your time in Russia?" I asked dad.

"Relaxing. Except for dinner with Vanya, Anya, Lyusya, and Yuri, I just spent time with my wives."

"You're slipping, Dad!" I teased.

"I made a choice, Pumpkin, and I'm happy. And that is what matters. Did you have fun here?"

"Yes! We mostly spend time with Kjell's friends as a group, and then there was a party last night."

"You're having dinner with us tonight, right?"

"Yes. Jesse will be there, too. We aren't bringing dates because you said it was a family meal."

"Katt, Mikael, and Elin will be there," Dad said.

"They may as well be family! Ashley is going to stay with them when she's an exchange student. Speaking of that, can I talk to you privately after Elin skates?"

"Or course."

We watched as the figure skaters did their routines, and when all of them finished, Dad and I walked took a walk along the concourse.

"Karin suggested it might be better if I didn't stay with them when I come here in two years."

"Is there a problem between you and Kjell?" Dad asked.

"No. Karin thinks that staying with them would kind of lock me into being with Kjell all the time, and that it might be better to live with someone else so that I had more freedom to experience Sweden. I'd be welcome to visit them as much as I wanted, of course."

"Are you and Kjell a couple?" Dad asked.

"No way!" I exclaimed. "He's nice enough, but he lives here, not to mention I do not want a steady boyfriend for a long time!"

"And you didn't promise anything, did you?"

"No. We talked about it, but I didn't promise. What do you think?"

"I think Karin has a very good point," Dad said. "But in the end, it comes down to what you want to do. I'll support you either way."

"Thanks, Dad! I still want to think about it, but I'm leaning towards taking a random placement when I fill out the application in a year."

I saw Elin hurrying towards us and she threw herself into my dad's arms, making it obvious to me that dad had been with her, or was going to be with her.

"I'm in first!" she exclaimed.

"I saw," Dad replied. "Have you met Birgit?"

"Yesterday! Hi, Birgit!"

"Hi," I replied.

"See you at dinner?" Elin said to Dad.

"Yes," Dad replied.

"Cool! Birgit, do you want to come meet the other girls?"

"Yes!" I replied. "OK, Dad?"

"Of course," he agreed.

I left Dad and followed Elin to the lounge where the skaters were and she introduced me to them, but not just girls. There were a couple of hunky male ice dancers who looked really good in their skating costumes.

"Hi, Birgit!" Katt called out when she saw me.

"Hi!"

"I need to shower and change," Katt said. "Back in a few!"

I didn't mind, because I could talk to Peter and Anders, two skaters who were in their early twenties. They flirted, and I found myself wondering what it might be like to be with an experienced guy. I'd had those thoughts again about Per at the party, but because I was there with Kjell, I really couldn't do anything with him without being rude. It was dancing with him that made me realize that Karin was probably correct in her assessment.

"How old are you?" Peter asked.

"Fourteen," I replied.

The two guys exchanged a quick look and stopped flirting with me. I was totally annoyed by that because I was a young woman, no matter what dumb laws or

dumb adults said. It was my body, and it was my decision. But it was obvious neither of the skaters felt the same way, so I decided to go wait outside the locker room for Elin.

"Hi, Birgit!" Mikael said coming down the hallway.

"Hi! Katt's in the lounge. I'm waiting for Elin."

"Did you get to meet any of the skaters?" he asked. "I can introduce you, if not."

"Elin took me into the lounge," I replied. "I got to meet some of them."

"Good."

And then an idea popped into my head. Mikael was a skater, and still in good shape, and I knew he was OK with Dad being with Katt, so maybe...

"Mikael, can I ask you something?"

"What's that?"

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

He smiled, "Yes, of course! Why would you think you weren't?"

"Because the guys I was flirting with stopped flirting when they found out I'm only fourteen."

"You know the rules, here, right?"

"Duh! But wasn't Katt twelve? And the guy older?"

"That was more than twenty years ago," Mikael replied.

"Would *you* say 'no'?" I asked trying to sound sexy and inviting.

Mikael smiled, "You are a beautiful young woman, but don't you think I'm a bit old for you?"

"Was my dad too old for Elin?" I asked, playing a hunch.

"Elin is sixteen," Mikael replied.

Confirming my suspicion!

"Don't you think I'm mature enough?" I asked.

"I'm positive you are, but given my age, they'd throw the book at me! If I were eighteen, that would be different!"

"As if I'd tell!"

"Birgit, you are a sexy, desirable young woman, and if you were a year older, I'd send you to Katt to ask permission. But you're under the age of consent."

"Ugh!" I groused. "Dumb men who make dumb laws need to mind their own business!"

"I don't disagree, but that doesn't change things," he said.

Elin came out of the locker room which ended the conversation. I was totally annoyed, but I couldn't let on. Elin and I went to the lounge to meet Katt, and then we went to join my family.

 Ashley

"Uh oh," I said to Birgit when we had some time together before dinner. "What's bugging you?"

"That obvious?" she asked.

"To me? Yes. To anyone else, probably not."

"I was flirting with two ice dancers and when they found out I'm only fourteen they stopped flirting."

"Boys or girls?" I teased.

"BOYS!" Birgit declared.

I laughed, "It wasn't *that* bad with Lilibeth, was it?"

"No, but it's just not my thing. The two guys were total hunks and around twenty-one or twenty-two and were happily flirting and were clearly interested until one of them asked how old I was."

"And that has you frustrated."

"Not just that," Birgit said, sounding annoyed. "I thought about Mikael, because I know Dad and Katt have been together, and he said I was a sexy, desirable young woman but because I was fourteen, he wouldn't even consider it! He said if I was fifteen, he would!"

"I agree the laws are dumb, but Birgit, seriously, even you aren't worth twenty years in jail!"

"Are you *sure* about that?" she asked, sounding both silly and annoyed at the same time.

"Come on," I said. "You know better."

"Fine, but it's my choice!"

"I agree, but most people don't."

"I know," Birgit sighed. "If I'd just been less obvious..."

"There's nothing you can do about that now," I said. "And maybe you should have spoken to Katt first. I know the story about her and the skater when she was twelve."

"Ugh! Why don't I think of these things? And how are you so sneaky?!"

I giggled, "I learned by watching how much trouble you get into by running your big mouth!"

"Argh!" Birgit growled.

If she had learned that lesson, which Kara Mom and Dad had tried to instill in her for years, she might just have been able to get what she wanted from Dad. But she hadn't and now she was frustrated because older guys thought she was too young.

"I don't know what to tell you," I said. "If you want an older guy, you're going to have to approach it the right way."

"None of Dad's friends have permission," Birgit protested. "Uncle Pete is a hunk, and I think Terry is cute and in good shape, but neither Melanie nor Penny would be OK with it! The same is true for Kurt. It sucks!"

"What about a High School guy with experience?" I asked.

"I want a *man!*" I declared. "Not a boy!"

"Not to be gross, but Jesse is a man, not a boy."

"OK, fine, but show me ANY of his friends, even the Seniors, who are as mature as he is!"

"You might have a point," I agreed. "Was it that bad with Kjell?"

"It wasn't bad," she said, "I just think it would be way better with someone like Dad!"

"There is nobody like Dad!" I giggled.

"Sad but true," Birgit sighed. "Sad but true."



July 28, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Birgit

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I said to Katt when we finished breakfast on Sunday morning.

She smiled and nodded and we left the dining room, then walked out of the hotel and onto the sidewalk.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Do you think I'm too young to have sex?" I asked.

"You know how old I was my first time," Katt said, "so I can't really say 'no'. But that's not your real question, is it?"

I sighed, "Mikael told you, didn't he?"

"Yes. But as with your dad and his wives, we tell each other everything, and we have to talk about it in advance. I made sure Mikael was OK with me being with your dad before I did anything."

"And he has the same freedom?"

"As your dad? No! But he could, in limited circumstances."

"Me?" I asked.

Katt laughed softly, "Only the daughter of Steve and Kara Adams would go to a man's wife and ask her to convince her husband to go to bed with her!"

"I was just asking in general," I protested.

"No," Katt said with a smile, "you weren't."

"Am I that obvious?" I asked.

"If you had asked me that question without having spoken to Mikael first, then I'd accept your statement that it was only 'in general'. But you asked Mikael, and he said you were frustrated by Anders and Peter."

"I'm older than you were," I groused. "And I'm obviously a woman!"

"Obviously!" Katt agreed. "But not every guy is like Lukas."

"Would you have given permission?" I asked.

"I probably shouldn't answer that question," Katt said.

"Oh, please! He said 'no' so what does it matter? You know Dad would be OK with it!"

"It's not right for me to answer at this point," Katt said. "Mikael gave you an answer."

"Fine," I groused.

"Brigit, relax," Katt said. "Men are often frustrating."

"Dad?"

"The most frustrating man I know! And I'm not the only one who thinks so!"

I knew exactly what she was talking about, but that didn't make it any easier.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"It's OK. I know what it's like to be a teenager, even though it's been a few years. Shall we go back and meet everyone to go to the rink?"

"Yes!"

V. Libidos Unleashed

July 28, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Steve

On Sunday morning, I read in the newspaper about an accident at the Sknyliv Air Show which had been held near Lvov, in Ukraine. At least fifty people had been killed and more than five hundred injured when a Ukrainian Air Force Sukhoi Su-27 had crashed and exploded. The pilot and co-pilot had ejected and only suffered minor injuries, but the plane had cartwheeled into the crowd of spectators and exploded. A full investigation was underway, but it seemed to me, from the description of the crash, to have been caused by some kind of mechanical failure, though I wondered about the flight path being so close to the spectators.

Later that morning, we headed to the rink for the skating competition.

"I think you're going to have fun tonight," Kara said with a smirk. "Only one skater to go after Elin, and I don't think they can score enough to win."

"Then I guess I should go to the 'kiss and cry'," I said with feigned resignation.

"Poor Tiger is going to be wildly fucked all night by a horny teenager!" Jessica teased.

"It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it," I chuckled.

"Steve, in all seriousness, what about her parents?" Suzanne asked.

"I have no idea what they think. They're here, but they didn't come down until yesterday. She has her own room, and they aren't even staying in the same hotel."

"I was more worried about the 'kiss and cry'."

"I'm sure Katt covered it somehow," I said. "She wouldn't put me in a bad spot."

I left the seats and headed to the entrance to the 'kiss and cry', arriving just as Elin went onto the ice. As I expected, she skated 'lights out' and when she came off the ice, Katt and I went to sit with her to wait for her scores.

"What do your parents think?" I asked Elin quietly.

"You're Katt's American benefactor," Elin replied, keeping her voice soft. "I'll kiss your cheek for the pictures. I'll kiss anything else you want later in my room!"

I smiled and nodded, and when the scores came up, Elin and Katt hugged, then Elin planted a quick kiss on my cheek. Her scores were absolutely good enough to win, and I didn't think the last skater could mathematically catch her, but I wasn't sure. In the end, it didn't matter, as the final skater made a minor error, which guaranteed Elin the victory.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, pumping her fist.

I stood with Katt during the medal ceremony and after Elin came off the ice with her gold medal, she went to shower and change, while I went to join my family, who were with the Kjellsons and Mikael, as well as Jesse's friend Anna.

Katt and Elin joined us about fifteen minutes later, with two people who, I assumed correctly, were Elin's parents. Katt introduced us and after I shook their

hands, Elin left with them, though they would join us for dinner later. We had some time to kill, so all of us went back to the Kjellsons' apartment.

A few hours later, we met at a Chinese restaurant, with Kristian having arranged for a large private dining room for the group -- Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, Birgit, Ashley, Jesse, Anna, Kristian, Karin, Kjell, Elin and her parents, Mikael, Katt, Kristina, and me. I was surprised when Magda and her «sambo» Oskar joined us, something Kristian had arranged without telling me.

We had a great time, and when the meal ended, Katt let me know that Elin would be in her room by 9:00pm.

 Birgit

Katt came over to me after dinner, and I felt her hand brush mine.

"Kristina and I will spend three hours together in her room," she said quietly, passing me a key.

"Really?!" I asked, a hitch in my voice and an instant fire burning in the pit of my stomach.

"Mikael and I spoke last night. If you want, he will."

"Oh, God," I moaned. "Yes!"

"Then head back to the hotel," Katt said.

Kjell might wonder where I was, so I went to Ashley.

"I need you to come with me," I said.

"Why?"

"Just do it for me, please!" I begged.

"Sure."

"Wait here, for a sec."

I went over to Kjell and told him I was going to hang out with Ashley but that I'd be back at the apartment in time for bed. He didn't object, so Ashley and I left the restaurant and headed towards the hotel.

"What's going on?" Ashley asked.

I showed her the key.

"So?" I asked.

"It's Katt's room," I giggled.

"You and Katt?" Ashley smirked. "Who knew?"

"Mikael, you goofball!"

"And you want ME to participate?" Ashley asked, giggling. "If YOU were too young, I'm WAY too young!"

"I need cover for Kjell," I said. "I don't want him to know."

"And I'm supposed to hang out alone?"

"No. Katt and Kristina will be in her room. You can hang out with them."

"While you get your brains fucked out?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed.

We arrived at the hotel and Ashley went to Kristina's room while I went to Katt's room and used the key to let myself in. The room was empty, but that didn't surprise me because I had left the restaurant before Mikael. I was dripping wet in anticipation, thought about what I should do, and decided on a plan. I went to the bed, turned down the duvet, undressed, and lay naked on my back in the middle of the bed.

A minute later, I heard a key in the door, it opened, and Mikael came in.

"Hi!" I exclaimed.

"Not wasting any time?" he asked.

"Katt said three hours and I want every second!"

"You're on the Pill?" he asked as he began undressing.

"Yes! And you and Katt were tested, because otherwise Dad wouldn't have been with her!"

Mikael was taller than Kjell, in better shape, and bigger where it counted! He got into bed next to me and turned on his side. I turned to face him.

"Did you have a plan?" he asked.

I giggled, "To have my brains fucked out!"

"I can do that!" Mikael declared.

We kissed, then he moved so he could suckle my breast and pleasure overwhelmed me. As much as I'd wanted to be with Lilibeth, Peter, or Kjell, the fire burning in my stomach demanded Mikael to get between my legs and fuck me *hard*. Be he had other ideas, at least to start, and his tongue on my nipple made me moan in pleasure, anticipating what it would feel like on my clit.

It seemed like forever before he released my nipple and kissed his way down my stomach, moving between my legs, and pushing his tongue into my dripping pussy. I groaned when he flicked my clit, and I knew right then I should have gone to someone like him for my first time. That thought was almost instantly washed away when I had the biggest, most powerful orgasm I'd ever had. My entire body shook, and I groaned loudly.

I was still shaking when Mikael's tongue was replaced with the head of his dick, which he rubbed up and down along my labia. He kissed me, and I felt myself part before him. I wrapped my legs around him and shoved my hips up as hard as I could, causing Mikael to bury himself in me.

"Fuck me!" I growled. "Fuck me hard!"

Mikael obliged and pounded me into the mattress as I slammed my hips up to meet his every thrust. The pleasure was intense, and it didn't take long before I screamed out in pleasure as my pussy spasmed hard around Mikael's dick, but we didn't stop humping, which made the orgasm more intense. It passed all too quickly, but almost immediately I felt another one building.

My body was on fire and I threw myself at Mikael as hard as I could, my legs wrapped around his butt, as he plunged in and out of me. I had another orgasm, even stronger than the previous one, and I wanted more! When I had my next

one, Mikael pushed hard into me, ground against my clit, then groaned as his hot cum splashed into me.

When our orgasms had passed, I released my arms and legs, pushed Mikael off me and quickly climbed on top of him, straddling his head with my legs. I pushed my pussy down onto his mouth, grasped his dick, and began licking our combined juices from it. He softened a bit, but I knew how to remedy that and took him into my mouth and began sucking as his tongue danced over my clit.

When he was rock hard, I was tempted to mount him, but I really wanted to taste him, so I bobbed, licked, and sucked, having two orgasms from his tongue before he shot into my mouth. I ran my tongue around his glans, accepting every spurt, and when I was sure he was done, I released him, turned, and French kissed him with a mouthful of his cum.

When I broke the kiss, I rolled off of him and onto my back, and spread my legs. He knew what I wanted, and moved between them, pushing his tongue into me and licking and sucking my clit, making me cum three times before he moved up, pushed into me, and we fucked hard and fast again. I came so hard from fucking that when Mikael pumped his cum into my pussy for the second time, I went limp, breathing hard.

"Short break?" he asked.

"Yeah," I gasped. "Just...let...me...catch...my...breath!"

We lay quietly together for about ten minutes before I moved down to suck Mikael hard, then rode him like a rodeo bull rider, having four more good orgasms before he came. After his last jet fired, I stretched out on top of him, our sweaty bodies touching along their entire length.

"Why did you change your mind?" I asked, knowing he'd need to recover after coming four times.

"Katt," he said. "She convinced me that I wasn't thinking of you as the woman you were, and was only seeing your age. I wouldn't do this with anyone else under fifteen, ever, but Katt convinced me that you're different."

"I am!" I giggled. "And you seemed to like it!"

"The over-exuberance of youth!" he said. "Or is it the new toy?"

"Both!" I exclaimed. "Would you do something for me?"

"I think I already did!" Mikael exclaimed.

"Obviously! But there are two things I haven't done that I want you to do with me!"

"What?" he asked warily.

"Between my boobs and cum on my face and then in my butt."

Mikael laughed, "You and Katt!"

"What?"

"Nothing," he chuckled. "There's lube on the nightstand. I probably can only cum twice more before our time is up, so you may want to consider your options."

"Men are wimps!" I teased. "I still don't get why we call wimpy guys 'pussies' because my pussy can take a pounding and come back for more immediately! And I bleed for four or five days a month without dying!"

Mikael laughed, "I think I'd agree to have periods to be multi-orgasmic!"

"I bet! But given the choice, my butt, and then the last time, go slow and as long as you can, but then hard at the end."

"Whenever you're ready, you can get me hard," Mikael said.

I laughed, "Show me a boy who doesn't want a blowjob and I'll show you a dead body!"

I moved on top of him, putting my pussy on Mikael's mouth, and used my mouth to get him hard, getting a small orgasm in return. When he was hard, I moved off and lay on my stomach and did my best to relax, remembering what I read about anal sex. I took several deep breaths while Mikael moved to get the lubricant, then spread my legs wide so he could get between them.

I felt him run a slippery finger between my butt cheeks, then felt the head of his dick against my hole. I took a really deep breath and let it out, relaxing all my muscles, then I felt some pressure.

"Ungh!" I grunted as he pushed into me.

"You OK?" Mikael asked.

"Yes," I gasped. "It just feels weird."

He began pushing into me and I groaned with each short thrust until he was buried in my butt. I felt like someone had jammed a telephone pole up there, but I didn't want him to stop. I snaked my hand under my body, pushed my middle finger between my labia, and began fingering myself.

"I'm OK," I said, breathing heavily.

Mikael began gently thrusting, and it felt really, really strange, but I was so excited that I easily brought myself off with my finger.

"Go harder," I gasped, and started squeezing my muscles around his shaft.

He did, and I had a second and third orgasm before Mikael grunted and groaned, then shot jet after jet of hot, sticky cum into my butt. When he pulled out, I felt strangely empty. Mikael got off me, slipped his arms under me, picked me up and carried me to the shower so we could wash up, something I knew was super important.

When we were completely clean, we went back to bed. We engaged in sixty-nine until Mikael was hard, and then we had a really gentle, really slow screw that lasted nearly thirty minutes, with me having six orgasms before Mikael had his. We lay together for about fifteen minutes before taking a second shower and getting dressed.

Mikael called for room service to bring clean sheets, as the ones on the bed were basically wrecked with my juices and drippings of Mikael's cum. I wondered what room service would say, but I couldn't stay to find out because we didn't want anyone to know.

"See you in two years when I'm here as an exchange student!" I declared at the door before giving Mikael a super-sexy kiss.

He laughed, hugged me tight, and I left the room, going to Kristina's room to get Ashley so we could go to the Kjellson's to meet our moms and Suzanne.

 Steve

"I am all yours until breakfast at 9:00am," I said to Elin when she let me into her room.

"You know what I want!" she exclaimed.

"To have sex, non-stop, for the next twelve hours!" I chuckled. "I'll try my best."

"Then get undressed, I'll suck you, then you pleasure me every possible way until you either pass out or it's 9:00am!"

"This junior suite has a tub large enough for us to soak in," I said. "We can take a bath together at some point."

"And have sex in there?"

"And in the shower if you want."

"I want! And why do you still have your clothes on?"

Why indeed!



July 29, 2002, Stockholm, Sweden

 Steve

I had managed to stay awake all night with Elin, but towards the end it had been my mouth and fingers that had pleased her, though I had saved one last time so that I could engage in a long, slow, sensual screw around 8:00am that lasted more than thirty minutes. When that finished, I was exhausted and in need of sleep, but Elin, with the benefit of youth and exuberance, was wide awake.

We'd had a bubble bath, screwing in the tub, and I'd taken her from behind in the shower we had afterwards to rinse off the bubbles. This shower, though, was only about getting clean and being presentable for breakfast. When we finished in the shower, we dried off, then dressed. We went to the door, and Elin threw her arms around my neck.

"I hope you can visit again!" she said. "We can have as many nights like this as you want!"

"I'd like that," I replied.

We exchanged a soft, sexy kiss, then she went into the hall to make sure the coast was clear. It was, so I went to the suite I shared with my wives, while Elin went down to meet Katt, Mikael, Kristina, and Ashley for breakfast.

"Have fun, Snuggle Bear?" Kara asked.

"I did! And as soon as we finish breakfast, I'm going to take a nap! We didn't make plans for today, at least for us. The kids have their friends, and if you three want to go shopping while I nap, that works."

"So long as we have your Amex card!" Kara exclaimed.

"Have fun with it!"

"We will!"

The four of us went to breakfast, where I read in the newspaper about the crash of a Ukrainian Air Force Sukhoi Su-27 at the Sknyliv air show, near Lvov, Ukraine, which had killed at least sixty and injured more than three hundred. There were scant details, though both pilots had ejected safely, likely meaning

we'd eventually know what had happened. When we finished breakfast, I went back up to the room and went to bed.



July 30, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"How was the trip?" Kathy asked when she and Natalie met us at O'Hare airport.

"It was good to get away," I replied. "And I didn't have a single call from work!"

"How did *that* happen?" she asked.

"By actually making the 'I want to be a programmer' thing stick!"

"Natalie and I are parked next to each other. I have our minivan and Natalie has Kara's SUV."

"Then let's go!"

Jesse, Ashley, and Birgit rode with Natalie while my wives and I rode with Kathy. I was surprised by Birgit's decision, but the trip to Europe seemed to have cemented her relationships with Jesse and Ashley, which was a good thing. I was really interested to see how Stephe had changed, and if her attitude had adjusted at all. Fortunately, Nicholas had remained behind in Sweden with Bethany and Tom, and when they arrived home in a day, he'd move back into their house, which would remove a point of tension.

When we arrived home, Albert, Matthew, and Chelsea greeted us. The first order of business after that was to unpack and begin the lengthy process of doing laundry for seven people.

"Anything exciting happen here while we were gone?" I asked Natalie.

"It was totally calm. Estrella is in Minnesota, so until Albert, Matthew, and Chelsea came home, it was just me. I hung out with friends, spent some time with my parents, and otherwise acted like a bum!"

"Nothing wrong with that! When is Estrella coming back?"

"The end of next week. She'll only be here a few days before she moves into the dorm at IIT. She also said she arranged to spend summers with Alejandra and Trent."

"I'm not surprised by that. Did you hear from Tabitha?"

"She's doing fine. I was out with her and Hope on Saturday. They're both doing fine."

"Any interesting mail?"

"Just bills, but I took care of them with the instructions and checks Suzanne left for me. There were a few messages I put on the board, but nothing urgent."

"Excellent."

"Any chance you could spend the night with me?"

"I believe my wives will be amenable," I replied.

"Awesome!"

 Birgit

As soon as I was unpacked, I called Tiffany, who came over right away.

"Why do you look like the cat who ate the canary?" Tiffany asked.

"Loki went on vacation!" I exclaimed.

"Kjell?" she asked.

"Yes, and it was good, but then I had an older guy fuck me silly for three hours!"

"NO WAY!" Tiffany gasped. "Seriously?!"

"Seriously!"

"You have to tell me!"

I told her everything, and she hung on every word.

"I wish I was fifteen!" she groused when I finished. "I don't want to wait!"

"You could find a younger guy," I suggested.

"Not after you said how much better it was with the older guy! And you know what I want!"

"Yes, but you can't say it!"

"Secret? Just to you? Nobody else is here and we're in your room. You know I'll tell you afterwards!"

Unfortunately, she, some other friends, and some cousins were all going to get what I had wanted. It had been so awesome with Mikael that being with dad would probably have made my brain short-circuit, not that it was a bad thing.

"Just once."

"The *Twister* party! Naomi, Hannah, and I will all be fifteen by April 18th!"

"You'd do that?"

"We all agreed! Will your dad do it?"

I laughed, "Three virgin fifteen-year-olds? Are you kidding?! But he has to be absolutely sure you'll never, ever talk about it."

"Except to you!"

"Don't even say that," I said. "Seriously, talk to *nobody* and tell *nobody*, and keep it that way. If you don't, it'll never ever happen."

"OK," Tiffany replied. "Are you going out with Peter again?"

"Yes," I giggled. "And I'm going to blow his mind!"

 Jesse

Nobody was home when I walked into the coach house, because both my moms were at work. I unpacked, started a load of laundry, then checked for messages and saw there were three. The first was from Coach Nolan saying our first practice was at 6:00am on August 5th, and I saw one of my moms had written it on the calendar, along with times for the rest of that week. The second message

was from CeCe, asking me to call as soon as I could, and the third was from Scarlett.

I decided to call Scarlett first, because I was positive CeCe would want to come over.

"Scarlett Butler," she said when she answered the phone.

"It's Jesse. I just got home about twenty minutes ago. What's up?"

"Bill agreed to plead guilty in exchange for two years, but he gets what they call day-for-day credit for good behavior, so he'll only be in prison for a year. He has to pay \$5000 in restitution to cover her counseling and has to register as a sex offender."

"That's probably about the best he could do," I said. "I'm just glad none of us have to testify. That would have been a royal pain."

"How were Sweden and Russia?"

"Great! I spent most of my time with Swedish and Russian kids my own age, though I did have my dinner with the Army officers, which was totally cool."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it! You start hockey practice soon, right?"

"Next Monday."

"Do you think I could visit before school starts? Like the third week in August?"

That was after CeCe left for Arizona, so it wouldn't affect my time with her, and Angelina wouldn't object because she'd get a lot of my time once school started.

"I don't have anything planned except hockey practice, so I'd be OK with that."

"I'll make reservations and send you an email."

"Cool!"

We said 'goodbye' and I called CeCe who, in what had to be the shortest call I'd ever made, had, as soon as she heard my voice, said she was on her way over. She arrived just under ten minutes later.

"Hi!" she exclaimed when I opened the door.

"Hi!" I replied.

She grabbed my hand and began tugging me towards the stairs. I managed to kick the door shut and allowed her to basically drag me to my room, where we fooled around for about ninety minutes until there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" I exclaimed, even though CeCe and I were lying naked side-by-side.

The door opened and Mom One stuck her head in.

"Cover up, you turkey!" she exclaimed.

I pulled the sheet over our groins, which still left CeCe's lovely breasts exposed.

"I see you didn't waste any time getting reacquainted!" Mom Two said from behind Mom One.

"Don't blame Jesse," CeCe said. "I dragged him to bed!"

"And he resisted, of course," Mom One said sarcastically.

"Well, no," CeCe replied with a smile.

"How was your trip, Jesse?" Mom Two asked.

"Great! I mostly hung out with Kjell and his friends in Sweden, and Eugen and his friends in Russia. And I had my dinner at the officer's mess, of course."

"Are you having dinner with us?" Mom One asked.

"Yes," I replied. "CeCe?"

"Yes, please. I don't have to be home until midnight."

"About an hour," Mom One said.

She closed the door to the room.

"You are bad!" CeCe exclaimed.

"Anything I can do to annoy the moms is a good thing!" I declared.

 Birgit

DadsPumpkin: Birgit 2, Loki 0!

AppleOrchardKaty: 🤔 So Loki didn't take a vacation to Sweden?

DadsPumpkin: No!

AppleOrchardKaty: Do you have any questions?

DadsPumpkin: No, I got this!

AppleOrchardKaty: You know I'm here if you need to talk.

DadsPumpkin: I know. Thanks.

AppleOrchardKaty: So what else did you do?

DadsPumpkin: Mostly hung out with Kjell and his friends and also went to an ice skating tournament where one of Katt's figure skating students won.

AppleOrchardKaty: Cool! Ready for school to start again?

DadsPumpkin: Believe it or not, yes!

AppleOrchardKaty: I believe it! You're Steve's and Kara's daughter!

DadsPumpkin: I am! And I proved that in Sweden!

AppleOrchardKaty: Is he still alive?

DadsPumpkin: They both are. Barely!

AppleOrchardKaty: Don't get out of control. I'm not saying don't have sex, just be smart.

DadsPumpkin: I'm on the Pill and I made sure both guys had tests.

AppleOrchardKaty: Good.

DadsPumpkin: How are things there?

AppleOrchardKaty: Busy, as always! We're already 92% booked through June of next year. We start taking July reservations tomorrow.

DadsPumpkin: Cool. I'll probably stay for two or three weeks next summer, if that's cool.

AppleOrchardKaty: You know you're always welcome. Will you be with your parents in March?

DadsPumpkin: Probably not. I think it's just Dad and his wives, plus the Jaegers. Not sure about the Quinns. Dad and Bethany are at odds.

AppleOrchardKaty: Uh oh. Over what?

DadsPumpkin: Bethany didn't learn the lessons she should have. Well, she did, but says it doesn't apply to the US.

AppleOrchardKaty: And your dad is not happy.

DadsPumpkin: That's an understatement. She's going to revise her book to basically say nobody can have sex unless they're both clueless virgins with the exact same birthday.

AppleOrchardKaty: I think you might be exaggerating.

DadsPumpkin: I'm not. She says age and experience create a 'power disparity' and if you take it to its logical conclusion, what I said is true. She would, in effect, say

I was abused by having an older guy for my second lover. I asked HIM and told him exactly what I wanted!

AppleOrchardKaty: 😊 Of course you did!

DadsPumpkin: I need to go because we'll be having dinner soon, but wanted to let you know I was home safe, and I defeated Loki in style!

AppleOrchardKaty: And you gave your dad all the details, of course.

DadsPumpkin: Actually, he doesn't know I had sex. Not about Lilibeth or in Sweden.

AppleOrchardKaty: Interesting. Why?

DadsPumpkin: I'm not sure. I might talk to him about it, but then again, I might not.

AppleOrchardKaty: I think you may have learned a lesson.

DadsPumpkin: Maybe. L&r!

AppleOrchardKaty: Bye!

I set myself to 'offline', then closed the chat client and headed downstairs to have dinner.



July 31, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Morning, Steve!" Lucas exclaimed when I arrived at the office on Wednesday morning. "How were Sweden and Russia?"

"Relaxing, and it was great to see old friends. How were things here?"

"Quiet, from what I can tell. You had a few calls, which I put through to Kimmy, but that's it. No process servers, no G-men, no cops, and non gun-toting Outfit thugs!"

"The fact that you have to say that tells quite a story."

"Don't I know it!"

"Have a good day, Lucas."

"You, too."

I used my badge to go through the door to the offices, climbed the staircase, and walked down the hallway to my office.

"Steve!" Kimmy exclaimed when she saw me.

She hopped up, hurried to me, hugged me tightly, and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Missed me?" I asked with a grin.

"I'll show you how much!" she said quietly.

"Right here?" I teased.

"If only you meant it!" she said dreamily.

"Anything important happen?"

"Jacob Goldberg called on Monday, and would like you to call him. He wasn't sure which day you were back and said it wasn't urgent."

"Anything else?"

"Eight messages, none of which were critical. Dante will be in town in November and wants to have dinner. I took the liberty of arranging it. Ruth's Chris on the 4th at 7:00pm. You have a meeting with the Lundgren Board next Tuesday evening at 6:00pm at the 95th. Samantha would like to have lunch, and I scheduled it for Friday at noon in her office. And Larry hired both Bianca Perez and Casey Thiele. They start next Monday. Their hiring notices are on your desk."

"Efficient as always! You may have five kisses!"

"Do I get to choose where?" she asked.

"Generally, chocolate is best taken orally, but whatever floats your boat!"

"You're just no fun!"

"A refrain I hear all the time!"

Kimmy went back to her desk, I changed to my soft-soled shoes, and walked across the «tatami» mats to my desk. I put my bag down, turned on my Mac and my PC, and sat down to see the deluge of email I was sure was waiting for me. Even though we limited our use of email, it still seemed to pile up, and I'd resolutely refused to check it while I was out of the office.

There were 173 emails, which, for three weeks, wasn't ridiculous in the scheme of things, and many of them were simply notices from the automated testing software. I knew Penny would have received copies, so I marked them all as read and dumped them into the archive folder for later review if it turned out to be necessary.

"Steve!" Penny exclaimed, coming into the office.

I knew I wouldn't get by with just a greeting, so I stood up and she hurried over to give me a hug.

"Hi, Penelope!" I said.

"There's a penalty for using my full name!" she declared. "Every time you say it, you have to fuck me senseless on your desk!"

"I don't think so, Penelope!" I replied with a grin.

"That's twice!" she declared.

"I'm glad to see you can count to two, Penelope!"

"If you don't stop, I'm going to close and lock the door and MAKE you do it!"

"No you aren't because you have an agreement with Terry, and there is no way either of us our violating that."

"You're just no fun!"

"Two for two," I chuckled. "You and Kimmy."

Penny went to her desk, and I sat back down. She turned on her workstation, then leaned over to kiss my cheek. I picked up the phone and dialed Jacob Goldberg's office. After being on hold for just over a minute, he came on the line.

"Well rested?" he asked after we greeted each other.

"Absolutely. The kids were really active, but mostly I spent time with friends and my wives."

"Someday you're going to have to tell me how you managed that! Anyway, as we expected, the Brauns disagreed over where to have the hearing. In order to nudge the court, we accepted the Baltimore court, and that tipped the balance, and all three petitions will be heard there. The asset schedules are still due as planned."

"Good. And the bank?"

"Is still trying for the million, but they won't get it, nor will they attach any of the VLC intellectual property. I think, after some private conversations with their counsel, they'll take \$25,000 for it, as they risk getting zero if they see it all the way through. But we won't make the offer until we see what's in the asset schedules."

"What about paying the Brauns to go away? At least on the IP?"

"It's possible, obviously, but the challenge is that any cash you give them would be attached by the bank to satisfy their million-dollar claim on Braun. We have no leverage on the criminal side, so there isn't much we can do there. Right now, I'd advise simply waiting until the asset schedules are filed. They're due by September 9th, which is a Monday. Then we'll see where we stand."

"OK. Any gotchas or concerns?"

"Not really. There's always the 'unknown unknowns' or more traditionally, the 'joker in the deck', but nobody at McCarthy/Jenkins nor Liz sees anything that concerns us. OK, we could theoretically lose the claims on the IP, but there is no evidence other than naked claims by Braun and his attempts to encumber all the IP with the loan, and neither of those pass muster under federal law or precedent. You know we can't guarantee an outcome, but this is as close to a slam dunk as anything I've seen. Check with Deborah Rice, but this is exactly like

the previous litigation on the matter going back to the Lone Star days. And we won those as a matter of law."

"Then I'll sit tight and wait to hear from you."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up. I finished reviewing my email, and as I'd expected, there was nothing urgent. That out of the way, I picked up the phone and dialed Melinda O'Brien.

"I'm back and ready for action," I said after we greeted each other.

"Thanks for accepting the assignment!" Melinda exclaimed.

"You're welcome. Penny officially hates me, but that's kind of a constant, anyway!"

"*Hey!*" Penny protested quietly.

"I arranged with Sam to give you and Penny access to the VLC source code and programmer documentation. I was surprised you didn't have full access to everything."

"I have the access I need to do my job," I replied. "I trust you and the other senior managers to do yours."

"Thanks. I think you'll find some serious discrepancies between their coding standards and ours, especially with regard to variable names and in-line documentation."

"No surprise. It'll take Penny and me a few days to review the documentation and code. What development is being done now?"

"The next maintenance release. We won't start working on the next feature update until November, which should give you time to complete the first pass. Per Dave, you'll replace input routines and database access with NIKA's standard modules, as well as clean up the code."

"That's the plan. Once we replace the database routines, you'll be able to use MySQL on the backend instead of requiring Microsoft SQL. That should help with bids."

"We don't lose many deals because of money," Melinda replied. "But that will help in those few instances. The bigger gain for us is standardizing on the NIKA backend so that we simply don't have to worry about it."

"Understood. I'll send you an analysis early next week. What do you have in the way of unit tests?"

"Not much, unfortunately. I have about half the team working on those while the other half is doing maintenance release work."

"OK. Get as many unit tests to the QA team as quickly as you can so that Penny and I don't have to spend time on those."

"I'll get out the whip!" Melinda declared. "I look forward to your analysis."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"Ready for our refactoring of VLC?" I asked.

"If I say 'no' will that change anything?"

"No."

"Then I guess I am."

We began by reviewing the programmer documentation which absolutely wasn't up to NIKA standards, but it wasn't part of our task beyond the necessary updates for the work we were doing. Melinda's team would eventually rewrite all of it, but that would take time, and some would be unnecessary as we integrated VLC with NIKA's standard backend routines. Just before lunch, I was alerted by *adium*.

mea_nani9595: Hi! Back from vacation?

NIKASteve: Yes! How are you, Keiki?

mea_nani9595: Great! Busy?

NIKASteve: I can chat.

mea_nani9595: Cool! I wanted to let you know that I sent the applications.

NIKASteve: Excellent! I spoke to my contacts at Stanford, and once you have your interview, they'll talk to you about possible scholarships and other aid.

mea_nani9595: Cool! You'll help if that doesn't work out, right?

NIKASteve: Yes, but I'm confident in my friends' abilities to make this happen.

mea_nani9595: Then I'll need to thank you properly!

NIKASteve: You being successful is thanks enough.

mea_nani9595: Don't I get to decide how to show my thanks?

NIKASteve: Yes, of course, but there are limits.

mea_nani9595: Is there something wrong with me?

NIKASteve: No! Let's just take things one step at a time, OK?

mea_nani9595: Yes.

NIKASteve: Let me know when you have your interview, and how it goes.

mea_nani9595: I will!

NIKASteve: Cool. Speak soon!

mea_nani9595: Yes! And thanks!
NIKASteve: You're welcome!

 Birgit

I wanted to call Peter, but he was in Greece with his family, so that would have to wait. Instead, I started calling my friends and inviting them over for lunch. Tiffany, Laurie, Hannah, Cynthia, Missy, Naomi, and Lilibeth all could make it, and I checked with Mom who let us order pizza. Everyone showed up by 12:30pm, which was when the pizza was delivered.

"Tell us about Sweden!" Naomi said once we sat down to eat.

"It was fun," I replied. "We hung out with Kjell's friends, went sailing and camping, and I lost my virginity!"

"Whoa!" Cynthia exclaimed. "Kjell?"

"Yes."

"How was it?" Missy asked.

"I would highly recommend sex," I giggled. "Highly!"

"You won't see him again for a long time, though, right?" Laurie asked.

"Probably next summer at the earliest, and maybe not until I'm there as an exchange student."

"I'm not sure I could do it with someone who wasn't my boyfriend," Laurie said.

"So don't," I replied. "I mean, everyone has to decide when it's right and who it's right to do it with."

"Birgit is right," Lilibeth said. "It's a personal decision that we each make. Nobody should criticize anyone's decision, either. Or their choice of partner, unless you see someone being abused."

"By whose standards?" I countered. "Some adults think any teenager who has sex is being abused!"

"I think we all know how to tell," Lilibeth said, "and it's friends who would know, not strangers."

Everyone agreed, and the conversation changed to vacations and the upcoming school year. After lunch, Lilibeth asked to speak to me privately.

"You don't think you lost your virginity with me?" she asked. "Not objecting, just curious."

"No, because for me it was always about having a dick inside me. I mean, you and I had sex, for sure, but, well, I guess I can't explain it better than that, really."

"But you don't think I'm a virgin, do you?"

"You don't, and that's what matters, right? I mean you've had sex with multiple partners, just no boys. And you said you think boys are gross."

"I just can't imagine kissing a guy or having a guy put his thing in me. Girls, on the other hand, yes, please!"

I laughed, "I don't think girls are gross, it just wasn't my thing, if that makes sense."

"Of course it does. You know I think you're totally hot and I said I'd do it with you again in a heartbeat, but I know you're basically straight. That said, if you decide you do want to do it again, I'll make you scream!"

I giggled, "Good to know! Let's go back to the others."

We went back to the great room to figure out what to do for the rest of the afternoon.

VI. Getting Back Into The Swing Of Things

July 31, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

The phone rang on Wednesday afternoon just as I was about to leave the house to meet up with Kwame, Tim, and Pete from the hockey team. I saw the CallerID and shook my head as I picked up the new wireless handset my moms had bought while I was in Europe.

"Go for Jesse," I said.

"Jesse, it's Viktoria! You're back!"

"Obviously," I chuckled. "Given you called the house and not my mobile phone!"

"I wasn't sure and I remember you said answering calls was expensive in Europe. How was your trip?"

"Great. How was your summer?"

"Boring. You know I'm hardly allowed any freedom."

"And I'm the devil incarnate, according to your dad."

"I know," Viktoria replied. "And I'm sorry for getting you into trouble. I'm really sorry you felt you had to change parishes, too."

"That wouldn't have been necessary if you had simply been honest with your dad."

"I couldn't! He'd send me to a monastery! I'm not kidding!"

"In the end, only the truth can set you free," I said.

"You don't have to live with my dad!" she protested. "But forget my dad! I want you to fuck my brains out!"

"Just out of curiosity, how do you expect that to happen?"

"Naked in bed!" she giggled.

I laughed, then said, "Yes, but I meant given your dad won't let you within a mile of me."

"He works during the day, and so does my mom, so I could go out."

"And if he finds out?" I asked.

"I'm certainly not going to tell him, and I'm sure you won't! Who would know besides us?"

"OK, but what if someone sees us together and tells him?"

"You can pick me up at Lake Ellyn Park. It's behind Glenbard West. It has a private circle drive and I can sit on a bench along the path until you get there. If I don't get up, it means I see someone I know and you should come back in ten minutes. You can drop me at the train station when you bring me back."

She actually had thought it out, or at least thought quickly enough to come up with a plan on the spur of the moment. She'd also had an STI test, and had started taking birth control pills. She was easily the prettiest girl I knew and had a fantastic body that I'd had a brief chance to explore.

The question in my mind was whether she could truly make it just about sex.

"And you realize that we might only be able to be together once, right?" I asked.

"Jesse Block!" she growled. "I told you that I want you to fuck my brains out! No strings. No conditions! But I hope you'll like it enough to want to do it again! I'm sure I will after what we already did!"

"We have to wait until after your period for the birth control pills to be effective."

"It should start tomorrow, so next Thursday would be perfect! Can you pick me up at 8:30am?"

We actually didn't have a practice that day because there wasn't ice time available, so that would work.

"What time would I need to have you home?" I asked.

"If you dropped me at the train station around 4:30pm, that would give me plenty of time."

"OK. If something comes up, call me. And I'll call you if there's a problem."

"Yes! See you a week from tomorrow!"

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up. I still wasn't sure it was a good idea, and I could easily call it off. As I left the house, I considered my motivations. Sure, she

was smoking hot and the making out we'd done had been fun and made me want her, and clearly made her want to as well. Was that enough of a reason? I thought so, because it had the added benefit of allowing me to stick it to her dad by sticking it to her! Of course, Deacon John would never know, but I would! I put all of that out of my mind and walked quickly to Lee's house.

 Steve

"Steve, I have Father Basil Reznikov on the phone for you," Kimmy said over the intercom.

"Put him through, please."

She did.

"Good afternoon, Father."

"Good afternoon, Stephen. I wonder if you have some time to talk."

I was positive it was about Jesse, and not just because of Jesse changing parishes, but also, I was sure, because of my involvement with the parish. That said, the building project had been completed, and the new financial team was following best practices.

"In person or via telephone?" I asked.

"Could we have lunch?"

"We could. Would Monday work? I'm busy tomorrow, and I know you'd prefer to avoid Fridays so you aren't limited in what you eat."

"Monday at 11:30am at Parthenon?"

"That will work. See you there."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, then updated my calendar.

"There you are!" Liz said, coming into the office.

"I've been here all day, including eating my lunch! Kimmy said there was nothing pressing."

"Except her body against yours, right?" Penny asked.

"Penelope," I said sternly. "Enough."

"FOUR!" she exclaimed.

"I'm not even going to ask," Liz said, rolling her eyes.

"A wise choice," I replied. "I spoke with Jacob Goldberg this morning and everything seems to be going to way we want. Any updates on the criminal cases?"

"They'll both have signed federal plea deals by the end of the month. The Colorado charges are going to be tougher, and they'll be transferred to Colorado custody as soon as they reach their deal with the Feds."

"No federal time?"

"No. Probation, fines, and disgorgement, plus an agreement from the elder Braun not to challenge the revocation of his law license and never to apply for another, not that he'd get one."

"The Feds can make a lifetime state licensing ban stick?" I asked.

"As part of a plea deal? Probably. But as I said, he'll never get a license, anyway. Ohio's revocation is 'permanent' and he's barred from reapplying. His admissions to practice before the Federal courts disappears with the revocation of his Ohio law license."

"Anything else that needs my attention?"

"No. Things were completely calm while you were away."

"I'm glad to hear that! Let's see if we can keep it that way."

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Michael

"How was Spain?" Andi asked when she arrived at the house to play *Age of Empires*.

"I had a good time. Eduardo and I did a lot of stuff together, and with my mom. Matthew and Chelsea basically did their own thing."

"You're home alone, right?"

"Yes. Mom is at work and Eduardo is in Buenos Aires. Matthew and Chelsea are in the city."

"Cool. So no interruptions!"

"Exactly!"

We went to the basement, and I turned on the two computers which were connected by a network.

"My dad got four tickets to the Sox game against the Mariners on Sunday the 11th," Andi said as we sat down side-by-side at the computers.

"Eduardo is supposed to be home on the 8th. He'll be in Miami on Monday. I'll make sure Mom knows so she can tell him when she speaks to him."

"Ready to get your butt kicked?"

"Hah!" I retorted.



August 1, 2002, Chicago, Illinois



Jesse

"Hi!" Angelina exclaimed when she arrived at the house on Thursday morning. "I'm really happy to see you!"

I let her in and we went to the kitchen, where I had lunch on the table for us.

"How was your vacation?" I asked.

"It was OK. We just visited family in Mexico. My cousins are OK, but I prefer my friends and cousins who are here. How was your trip?"

"I had a great time in Sweden and Russia. I really liked seeing my friends who are officers in the Russian Army."

"Any girls?"

"There are, indeed, girls in Sweden and Russia," I replied.

Angelina laughed, "You know what I meant!"

"I had a good time! You figure it out!"

"That means yes, of course! I'm the only girl you're still seeing here, right? I mean regularly?"

"I'm still going to see CeCe until she leaves for Arizona in two weeks, but otherwise, you know all the other girls have boyfriends, or at least they did when I left. But remember, I'm not interested in being a couple."

"I remember! Changing topics, we were thinking of having a party for the cheer team and wondered if you might want to host a joint one with the hockey team."

"Twenty players and twelve cheerleaders would be unbalanced," I replied.

"So invite the Seniors on the softball team! That would about balance it out."

"That's an idea. When?"

"Labor Day weekend would be perfect, but I think you're going to be away."

"Yes. I'll be visiting my Russian friends in Washington, DC. I also need to check the calendar in the kitchen in the main house to see what days are free."

"Can we go over after lunch and use the sauna and the whirlpool?"

"If you want."

"Yes!"

 Stephanie

"You're in a totally better mood," Ashley said. "I'm glad."

"I was being a real bitch, wasn't I?"

"You said it!" Ashley tittered. "What about Nicholas?"

"What about him? When he's ready to kiss my feet and beg me to take him back, I'll think about it!"

"I thought you were done being a bitch?!"

"That doesn't mean I'm happy with him! Birgit seems to have mellowed a bit."

Ashley laughed, "You can put two and two together and come up with four!"

"Kjell?"

"I can't answer that," Ashley said. "You have to ask Birgit."

"But you know, right?"

"Sure, but would you want me telling people who you have sex with?"

"No."

"And since when do you care, anyway? You're the one who totally doesn't want to know about who Dad is banging!"

"You and Birgit are WAY too interested in that topic!"

"I think it's amusing," Ashley replied. "It's Birgit who is annoyed."

"Well, now that she's done it, maybe she'll let it go."

"Actually, she's been a lot better about stuff like that. Dad doesn't even know she had sex."

"Bull!" I protested. "Birgit tells dad *everything*!"

"As I said, she's a lot better. She's different, Steph. And that started before she had her cherry popped! Seriously, she's a whole lot easier to get along with."

"You always got along with her," I said. "You get along with everyone."

"Even you!" Ashley teased. "But I had to use supreme effort with you *and* with Birgit. But give her the benefit of the doubt. I think you'll find she's a whole lot nicer and a lot less smug."

"It would be hard to be more smug, though Jesse is!"

"He's changing, too," Ashley said. "I think we're all growing up and figuring out how to deal with the world."

"Says my sister, who is only ten!"

"I'm Steve Adams' daughter!" Ashley declared. "Just as you are! And we're our moms' daughters, too! Even on our worst days, we're way more grown up than most of the kids in our grades at school."

"Low bar!" I exclaimed. "Very low bar!"

"True! Do you want to go get Slushies?"

"Yes!"



August 2, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Our mission appears to have been an abject failure," I said when I sat down to eat lunch with Samantha in her office on Friday.

"Which one?" she asked.

"Bethany," I sighed. "She hasn't changed her thinking. She says Sweden is different, and in her mind that means not applying any of the lessons she's learned while living here. She is, in effect, providing ammunition for the repressive elements in the US, and giving intellectual cover to people like Kara's former pastor and my mom. Worse, her publisher is encouraging her to revise *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* to, in effect, say teens shouldn't have sex, and she's planning to do that."

"What?!" Samantha gasped. "You can't be serious."

"As a heart attack," I replied. "This morning I ordered four cases of the current edition of the book."

"Did you speak to Tom?"

"Privately, he agrees, but he won't do anything to mess up marital harmony. I made it clear that I intend to shun Bethany, and not allow her to interact with any of my kids, and to advise the parents of the cousins to do the same."

"What about the welcome home party planned for the 10th?"

"Canceled," I replied. "I let Tom know this morning. He wasn't happy, but said he understands. I'm sure that had Bethany in tears again, but she doesn't appear willing to change her mind, and is dismissing everything she witnessed in Sweden as 'different cultures'."

"Jesus, Steve! Her new thinking would make you and me abusive, even though I was the predator and you were the prey!"

"Exactly. As I said to her, following your thinking to its logical conclusion, only two completely inexperienced and completely ignorant virgins could ever have consensual sex. She accused me of only being concerned about having sex with teenagers and refused to listen to any arguments. I told her I didn't give a flying fuck what she thinks about my sex life, but I would be damned if I'd sit idly by and let her and society fuck up my kids and the cousins!

"The end result of this insane path the country is on is going to be nightmarish, and next up is the 'Junior Anti-Sex League' led by Kent van der Meer and my mom, with Bethany providing them with intellectual cover! I said that she is helping the fools on the religious right destroy sexuality, and making it harder to get good sex education, obtain birth control, and have access to abortion. She talks a good game about those things, but in the end, she's thrown in with the repressive prudes because of a warped view of consent that resulted from her conclusion that ANY power disparity is sufficient to deny consent."

"Fucking hell," Samantha said, shaking her head.

"I know, right?"

"You know what? Hang on a sec."

She got up and went to her desk, flipped through her Rolodex, and dialed a number.

"Phil? Samantha Spurgeon. We need to talk, in person...No, right away, as in tomorrow...It's that serious...I'll send the jet for you."

She hung up and sat back down.

"Who was that?"

"The publisher," I said. "A guy dad went to college with. Dad refinanced their family publishing business and bailed them out of a financial pickle about fifteen years ago. He owes me."

"You're going to kill the revision?" I asked.

"Either that or exercise Dad's warrants to buy the company outright and fire the publisher."

"You're joking!"

"Do I sound like I'm joking? It's profitable and almost debt free. I'll put him out on his ass, and put someone else in, then spin it off once I'm satisfied."

"That sounds like what Clayton calls using a howitzer to kill a gnat!"

"Yes, but in this case, it's a necessary warning shot. If I have to self-fund the book forever, I will. And I guarantee you the standard publishing contract allows it to

be updated by someone other than Bethany if she doesn't produce something they want to publish."

"She's going to hate me," I said with resignation.

"The publisher will simply say that they've had a change of heart and would like updates that discuss advances in the fight against AIDS, expand the section on gay and lesbian relationships, and also update the language to reflect the decade that has passed. Does anyone use the bases anymore?"

"Not according to the kids! Jesse actually made the comment once that he had engaged in what 'old folks' called 'petting'."

Samantha laughed, "Another word in the book. I think he'll see the light, if not, he'll get the boot."

"It pays to have friends who, from my perspective, have unlimited funds."

"I'm telling you, we could be the ultimate power couple! Dad knew what he was talking about, but you were already married to Kara and Jess, and that is never going to change, and I'm not the sharing type."

"I said we were the ultimate power couple without the sex!" I chuckled. "And you said it was just like your mom and dad!"

Samantha laughed, "I did say that. Now that we have that out of the way, I want you to serve another two-year term on the Board of Directors of the Lundgren Foundation. Ben wants you to do it, but figured you'd tell him to pound sand. He doesn't think you'll say that to me, and neither do I."

"I should, just to prove you wrong! But you know I can't say 'no' to you; I never could!"

"Thank you."



August 3, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"When do you start the critical thinking seminars?" Kara asked as she, Suzanne, and I walked Jessica to the hospital on Saturday morning.

"On the 12th," I replied. "Al called yesterday afternoon and let me know they'll be during the 'optional seminar' periods on Thursday afternoons.

"I thought they were mandatory," Suzanne observed.

"They are," Jessica interjected. "but rather than take away time from classroom work, which the First Years sorely need, it'll be twice a month during the time when we usually have optional seminars."

"My only concern," I said, "which I expressed to Al, is the number of students. I'm not sure a hundred students is workable. I suggested to Al that we divide the group into two, and run them four times a month. He's supposed to let me know next week. Even fifty is going to be a challenge, because it limits participation, but I think I can make it work."

"Is this being graded in any way?" Kara asked.

"Steve isn't a physician, so that limits his input, and the first two years are Pass/Fail, anyway. Nobody fails Practice of Medicine, of which this is part, unless they simply don't come to class and don't do the necessary reading. Everything really

hinges on anatomy and anatomy lab. Pass that, and you're good to go for Second Year. Flunk, and you retake the entire year, or simply drop out. We lose an average of around a dozen students first semester, and overall, about ten percent of enrollees fail to graduate either because they can't pass the MLE part exams or fail their Clerkships or Sub-Internships."

"How do you plan to teach, Steve?" Suzanne asked.

"Some reading, some lecture, some small groups. We'll start with *Brain Power* by Karl Albrecht. It was published about twenty years ago, but I think it's a good starting point."

"Not one of your Asian or Greek philosophers?" she asked.

"Sun Tzu meets medicine might be interesting," I chuckled. "As would Machiavelli! But I think this is a better choice because it's focused on six main points -- Fact finding; BS detection; thinking on your feet; generating ideas; problem solving; decision making. Plato, unfortunately, would require too much time to discuss and find the valuable lessons. I'll recommend him on the reading list, along with others, but I think a direct, practical approach is better."

"Hopefully it'll help," Jessica said. "The overall quality of students is declining."

"Blame the education system," I said. "It's going to get worse, too, because you know what will happen once the *No Child Left Behind Act* is fully implemented."

"Teaching to the standard tests to ensure funding," Kara observed.

"Worse than that is that the focus on science and math, while laudable, is going to reduce time spent teaching history, civics, foreign languages, art, and music. That's a recipe for disaster. Paraphrasing George Santayana from his book, *The*

Life of Reason, -- Those who cannot remember the past condemn those of us who do to watch helplessly while they repeat it.

"Students not well-versed in history, art, music, and civics will make poor citizens because they will not understand the «kami» of the United States. You know NIKA generally rejects students without sufficient liberal arts courses, or as an alternative, demonstrated extra-curricular reading or activities that make up for that."

"I'm glad I graduated when I did," Suzanne interjected. "But I'm seeing hints of lack of critical thinking even from my professors at UofC."

"You'll see it everywhere, unfortunately," I said. "If students aren't taught critical thinking, they won't be able to separate propaganda from fact, which is difficult to begin with."

"And why you read multiple, independent sources for news," Kara said.

"Exactly. Jess does that with medical journals, too, with *Lancet* and *JAMA* and whichever other ones she has piled on the table in the 'Indian' room!"

"Ones I don't have nearly enough time to read," she replied. "I really do limit myself to emergency medicine and general topics."

When we arrived at the hospital, the three of us kissed Jessica, and after she went into the ER, we turned for home. I cuddled Birgit briefly, we had breakfast, spent some time relaxing, and then Kara, Suzanne, Birgit, Stephie, Ashley, and I headed to the dojo.

"Good morning, «Shihan»," I said to Will, bowing.

"Good morning, Sensei Steve!" he replied, returning the bow. "How was Europe?"

"Relaxing, but I also didn't exercise or practice my kata. I did walk a lot, though."

"Then you can lead exercises this morning!" he declared.

"Yes, «Shihan»!"

"Before we begin, what days do you plan to be here?"

"Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, plus my Sunday private class. That said, I'll miss next Tuesday because I have a Board meeting to attend."

"OK."

Three weeks of no practice and only walking left me slightly winded at the end of the training session, and I needed to resume my exercise routine, which I'd skipped so far after being back in Chicago. On the way home, I let Suzanne know.

"I plan to start running again tomorrow," I said.

"Usual time?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Can I run with you?" Birgit asked.

"You're more than welcome," I said. "Can you keep up?"

Birgit laughed, "With my 'Old Man'? Yes!"

"We'll see," I chuckled. "Be dressed and ready at 6:20am. We'll go as soon as we come back from walking to the hospital. And if you decide to run with us on Monday, that's at 5:45am, if Her Royal Highness can drag herself from her bed!"

"Hah!" Birgit retorted. "Are you having your class for your private students tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yes. Everyone should be there. You want to join?"

"Yes. I need help to prepare for being a black belt, and I don't mean kata, «kihon», or «kumite»."

"You're welcome to join us," I said.

"Thanks!"

Birgit was, finally, beginning to show overall maturity. She'd always been responsible, but she was developing the self-awareness that was necessary to navigate the complex adult world.

At home, everyone showered and then had lunch. After lunch, I went to my study to write in my journals, something I had not done while I was in Sweden or Russia. I'd written about a eight hundred words when Ashley came to the door of the study.

"Dad, Maya Sosa is at the back door," she said.

"It's OK for her to come in," I said.

"OK!" Ashley replied.

She left and Maya came into the study, closing the door behind her.

"I was careful about being seen," she said.

"I appreciate it. How are your preparations for college?"

"Basically done! I have all the new clothes I need and a new backpack. I leave for Florida State on the 19th. We're driving because you know my dad has to absolutely see my dorm room and make sure it's 'safe'."

"Co-ed dorm?"

"By floor, otherwise he'd have never let me go! Are you busy right now?"

"Just writing in my journal," I replied.

"Could you spare an hour?"

I could, and we went to the former nanny room to fool around. Just under an hour later, we got into the shower.

"I know you were worried about the fallout from what happened with the softball team," Maya said as I soaped her body, "but it seems to have blown over. Kristy and Paige wanted to know if we could spend a Saturday or Sunday afternoon with you before we leave? It would have to be the weekend of the 10th or 17th."

She was right that things had calmed down, and the three of them had done their best to avoid doing anything that might cause suspicion. I certainly didn't need to do it, though I obviously wouldn't mind being with the three girls. Ultimately, it seemed best to not risk stirring up a hornet's nest by having the desired threesome.

"As much as I'd like to," I said, "I think what happened with the cheer team and softball team, and the confrontation with the parents, says I should decline. I'm OK if you want to come by on Sunday afternoons until you leave, but I have to say 'no' to Paige and Kristy."

"I was pretty sure that would be the case," Maya said as she moved under the spray to rinse off. "They'll be disappointed, but they'll also understand because of the level-10 freakout last Spring."

We finished our shower, dried off, dressed, and I walked her to the back door, where she gave me a quick kiss before leaving the house.



August 4, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Hi, Pumpkin," Dad said as I came into the sunroom after showering. "Recovered from the run?"

"I think I'm a bit old to be called 'Pumpkin', don't you? I'm a woman, you know!"

Dad chuckled, "Don't I know it! You're pretty good at teasing your 'old man' about stuff he shouldn't even be thinking about!"

"First of all, you know I don't really think you're old. Second, you've always told me that the best fantasies are the ones that always stay fantasies."

"You got me there!"

"I could get you anywhere!" I smirked. "And you'd love it!"

"You go ask your moms *that* question," Dad replied with a smile. "We both know there's no way they'd ever agree."

"True, but it would be a lot of fun!"

"It's better not to think about it too much," Dad said.

"Because you're tempted!" I teased.

"Possibly!" Dad agreed.

"I want to ask you something. Will you answer me honestly?"

"I've always tried to do that," Dad replied.

"Who was your first?" she asked.

Dad was quiet for a moment, then said, "That's not really something that should be discussed."

"I know," I agreed. "But I thought you might tell me about it."

"No names. OK?"

"Sure."

"Is there a specific reason that you're asking now?"

"I asked my question first!" I said with a silly smile.

"True. She was about nine years older than I was. She didn't have a husband at the time."

"Divorced?" I asked, having a pretty good idea who it was.

"I'd prefer not to answer."

"Then I know who it is," I declared mirthfully.

"Now how could you know THAT?" Dad asked, surprised.

I considered if I should tell him and decided that I should.

"You won't answer," I said, "which means it has to be someone who I know, and someone you still see regularly. I know exactly one person who fits the bill of being nine years older and who wasn't married when you were fourteen!"

"I had to have smart kids!" Dad said, sounding slightly exasperated.

"Does Aunt Elyse know?" I asked.

"Yes. And so do your moms."

"Do Matthew and Chelsea know?"

"No," Dad replied. "And it needs to stay that way, please."

"One more secret for me to keep for you!" I giggled.

"You just have a knack for finding things out," Dad grouched, but didn't sound upset.

"You mean like about you and Kristin?" I smirked.

"It doesn't count as 'finding out' if she TOLD you about it!" Dad protested.

"She didn't just tell me, she gave me all the details. She bragged about it! I'm jealous!"

"Remember what I said about fantasies?"

"Oh, I do! And after talking to you, I decided for sure that when I'm an exchange student, I don't want to stay with Karin and Kristian, even if it bothers Kjell."

"I wondered about that," Dad said with a knowing smile. "You two were VERY discreet! He was your first?"

"Yes, of course! He performed adequately! But maybe I should have gone to Uncle Kurt or Uncle Pete!"

"And you think that either Kathy or Melanie would have EVER allowed that?"

"No, of course not! But Kjell was a virgin as well, so we kind of had to figure things out."

"Birgit Elizabeth Adams!" Dad said, laughing. "You read Bethany's book, as well as had long talks with me and with both of your moms. I also know you talked with your Aunt Penny as well."

I smirked, "That was an interesting conversation to say the least! Even more detailed than the one with Kristin! But Dad, you have to know, it's WAY different to talk about it than to do it."

"Very true," Dad agreed. "But you're my daughter, so I'm sure you figured it out. And that you both enjoyed it."

"Of course we did! So now, about those fantasies..." she smirked.

"You are so bad!" Dad chuckled.

"And so are you! My mom and Suzanne will be up soon. We could make breakfast for a change."

"I suppose so," I said. "Let's go."

"And you can tell me all about how Aunt Jennie got your cherry!"

"You are absolutely your mother's daughter!" Dad replied.

We got out of the chaise and went to the kitchen to start making breakfast. Dad told me about how he'd done yard work for Aunt Jennie and how she'd eventually suggested they have sex. And then I laughed hysterically.

"Five seconds? Really?"

"Really," Dad replied. "It's not an uncommon problem! And I've never had it since!"

"Kjell lasted less than a minute the first time. He got better!"

"I would hope so," Dad chuckled.

"I know I teased it before, but would you be upset if I was with an older guy?"

Dad was quiet for a moment, which surprised me, because I was sure he would be OK with it given what he'd done many times.

"Katt spoke to me," he finally said.

"WHAT?!" I growled, completely outraged at the violation of my privacy.

"Relax, Pumpkin," Dad said. "You know Kristin spoke with Kathy beforehand, and that will be true for other cousins who shall remain nameless, should they be interested. I obviously didn't say 'no'."

"Because you aren't a hypocrite," I replied, seething at Katt. "But still!"

"Think about it," Dad said. "You were under the age of consent, even in Sweden, and Mikael is almost my age. They both know my views, but given the risks, they needed to make sure. Think about what Suzanne said to your friends, too. May I ask if anyone besides Katt and Mikael know?"

"Ashley, because I needed cover so that Kjell wouldn't be hurt."

"She wouldn't reveal it under Chinese Water Torture or having her fingernails pulled out," Dad chuckled. "Good choice."

"Wait!" I exclaimed. "You thought he would be my first?"

"It made sense," Dad replied. "We both know what you wanted, and you know Katt and I have permission, so Mikael would have been the logical choice. You had the means, the motive, and the opportunity!"

"As if it were a crime!" I giggled. "Wait, it actually was, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The world has changed in the past decade such that you want to be *extremely* careful until you turn seventeen. Well, you'll be sixteen when you're in Sweden, so that won't be a problem."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Extreme caution. And you know that most of the girls under eighteen think I'm too old."

"But there are ones who don't," I replied. "But I know we don't talk about it because of the trouble it could cause."

"You're learning," Dad said. "It's nice to see you maturing."

"I'm truly a woman now!" I declared. "Did you say anything to my moms?"

"No. Katt spoke to me in private and I would never violate your privacy that way. Katt was reluctant, but decided she needed to make sure, which was wise."

"Thank you."

"May I offer one piece of advice?" Dad asked.

"Sure," I replied.

"Be circumspect. Even if you're with boys your age, parents can still cause trouble. You want to be careful what you say even to your closest friends. Katy is totally safe, and I'd never try to limit what you said to her. And if you feel the need to tell Ashley, I can't object too much because that kid would resist KGB torture!"

I giggled, "No kidding! Can I tell you one more thing?"

"If you feel it's necessary."

I thought about it and decided I should.

"I actually had sex before I was with Kjell, but it was with a girl."

"You know my position on that, too."

"On top, making slow, passionate love!" I giggled.

"You know what I meant!" Dad protested, laughing hard.

"It felt really good, but I'm not sure if I'll do it again."

"Did you speak to Katy about it?"

"Yes."

"Her advice on that topic is probably better than mine," Dad replied.

I put down the spoon and bowl I was using to mix the waffle batter and held out my arms for a hug. Dad put down his knife and held me in his arms.

"I love you, Dad," I said.

"And I love you, too, Pumpkin," He replied.

 Jesse

I drove to the Cathedral in Des Plaines for Sunday Matins and the Divine Liturgy. I didn't really know anyone there, but a group of teens invited me to

have coffee and doughnuts with them in the parish hall after the services. They all seemed cool, though most of them lived to the northwest or the north, which would make it difficult to get together given my hockey schedule. We all went to Sunday School together, and then I headed home to meet up with my friends who had graduated and were going away for college. The best part, though, was that Mia and Jerry joined us, as I hadn't seen them in ages.

"You're still planning on UW, right?" Mia asked.

"Yes. You guys will be Seniors when I'm a Freshman."

"How was your hockey camp?" Jerry asked.

"Awesome except for my roommate being an idiot and getting arrested for going further than a girl wanted to go."

"Ouch. Sent home?"

"Sent to prison for two years," I replied.

"He raped her?" Mia asked.

"He pled guilty to aggravated criminal sexual assault," I replied.

"Only two years?" Luna, who was one of the Seniors, asked.

"A plea bargain saves the state the trouble of a trial and the girl from having to testify. Supposedly she and her family agreed to the plea deal. He's basically screwed for life with a felony conviction and he has to register as a sex offender."

"Did anything happen to you?"

"Other than having to speak briefly to the cops, no."

"But otherwise, camp was good?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah. I honed my skills by working with a goalie coach. We start practice and tryouts tomorrow. Twenty-five pre-registered for twenty slots, and walk-ons are OK anytime this week."

"Any other goalies?"

"Pete, who's a Sophomore this year. He's good, but I should hold on to the starting position. There weren't any others on the list, but as I said, we could have walk-ons."

"How many Seniors?" Mia asked.

"Six total, only Lee is missing today because he had something going on with his parents."

"What about the softball team, CeCe?" Mia asked.

"Thirty-three are trying out for twenty-four spots," CeCe replied. "They're also allowed to have three girls who practice with us who can substitute for someone who is injured. And we had six Seniors, including Luna and me, who graduated. Are you playing hockey?"

"Club for me," Mia said. "Jerry plays pickup, but he's on the coaching track with the UW team. Someday he'll be coaching in the NHL!"

"Softball is a way to pay for college for Luna and me," CeCe said.

We had a great time and when we finished, Jerry, Mia, CeCe, and Luna walked with me. It was on the way to Luna's house, but when we reached mine, she asked if she could hang out with us.

"We're going to use the sauna," I said. "I'm not sure your parents would approve."

"They wouldn't, but I'm eighteen and leaving for college in less than two weeks! There's literally nothing that they can do. I mean, sure they could complain to your dad, but so what?"

Dad's rule was that anyone who was eighteen could totally decide for themselves, and I certainly didn't have a problem with Luna joining us.

"Fine with me," I said.

VII. YOU BASTARD!

August 5, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

On Monday morning, I drove Aunt Kara's SUV to the Quinns' to pick up Nicholas, who was waiting on the stoop with his gear. I helped him load it into the back of the van with my gear, and we set off for Johnny's Ice House.

"Do you know why my mom is so upset with your dad?" he asked as we drove along Halsted Street.

"No. I know they spoke in Sweden, but I have no idea what might have happened. You hung out with us most of the time, so you know I didn't spend much time with my dad or his wives."

"Well, something is wrong," Nicholas said. "Tom said that your dad canceled the 'welcome home party'."

"No clue," I replied. "I didn't see it crossed off on dad's calendar, but then again, I haven't checked it since last Thursday. If they're fighting, it's probably best that we stay out of it. I sure don't want to have it cause problems for us or the hockey team."

"Do you think I'll make at least third line?" he asked.

"I think so. You'll make the team for sure, because you're better than three of the forwards who didn't graduate, and they're all at least a year older. Just practice hard, don't let up, and never let them see you bleed!"

Nicholas laughed, "If I'm bleeding, I'm doing it wrong!"

"Not from what I see watching the NHL!" I chuckled.

"Yeah, but the cages we have to wear mostly prevent it. Any advice besides playing hard?"

"Most of the guys will be bigger than you, even though you're big for thirteen, because the Seniors are five years older. Starting school a year early was not a bad thing, but it makes a huge difference in terms of size. You'll have to be smart and skate with more finesse than in the Park District leagues, where you mostly play with kids who are no more than two years older.

"And listen to the coaches. They'll correct things they don't like, and expect you to do it their way. You could get away with a lot in the Park District leagues in terms of doing whatever you wanted, but that's not true here. You'll get demoted or even benched if you don't stick to the program exactly as explained. Don't dog it, either. Skate quickly to your position or to the bench, or to a coach when he calls you."

"You're going to start in goal, right?"

"I should. I'm a year older than Pete and I beat him last year. After the goalie camp in Minnesota, I'm positive I've improved. He didn't go to camp and played in one of the Summer 'fun' leagues.

We arrived at the rink, unloaded our gear, and headed for the locker room. The coaches all greeted me by name, and I introduced Nicholas. We both filled out our 'player bio' sheets and handed them to coach, then changed into our gear. As guys came in, I introduced them to Nicholas and took stock of the guys I didn't recognize. When everyone was dressed, coach had each of us stand up and

introduce ourselves, then sent us out to the ice to warm up before starting our first practice.

 Steve

I met Father Basil at Parthenon at 11:30am as planned, and after we greeted each other, the hostess sat us in at a table for two. A waiter came immediately and took our drink orders. Father Basil and I agreed to decide what to order before beginning what I was sure to be a conversation about Jesse, and when the waiter returned with our drinks, we placed our meal orders.

"I assume you know that Jesse decided to transfer his membership to the Cathedral," Father Basil said once the waiter had left.

I nodded, "He let me know about his decision, but I didn't discuss it in detail with him. You know I stay completely out of decisions such as that."

"Do you know the source of the problem?"

"The same thing that is the source of most problems for teenage boys," I said with a smile. "Teenage girls! Or in this case, the parent of a teenage girl who made patently false accusations against him. Granted, I only have Jesse's side of the story, and I know you're bound by the sanctity of the Mystery of Confession, but to my knowledge, Jesse has never lied to either of us."

"To my knowledge, he has not."

"Then his position was untenable if the young woman in question didn't tell her father the truth. And that's exacerbated by the fact that her father is Deacon John. I honestly don't see how Jesse had any choice."

"It really is a delicate situation," Father Basil replied. "And your assumption that I have what amounts to inside information is correct, as is your understanding that I can't reveal what I know."

"Jesse's decision is logical, reasonable, and measured," I replied. "I appreciate everything you've done for him, but at age sixteen, he has to decide for himself what's best for him spiritually. I was a bit younger than he is now when I had an unresolvable conflict with the Roman Catholic Church. I chose to leave, and except for a few weddings and funerals, have not set foot in one of their churches since I was fifteen. Jesse chose a different way because his conflict is personal, not with church doctrine."

"You know, I don't think we ever discussed in detail why you left the church."

"Teenage boys and teenage girls," I replied with a smile. "But my mom chose to force the issue rather than let me work it out for myself, and that led to me being excommunicated because I wasn't about to repudiate my relationship with my first true love."

"That was the young woman who later died in a boating accident, if I recall correctly."

"Yes. Had my mom left me to work it out, who knows what might have happened, but she chose to make my confession for me, so to speak, and things spiraled out of control after that."

"It's a difficult challenge for any pastor," Father Basil said. "I would exclude someone from the Eucharist only as a last resort, and only if I felt it wouldn't harm them spiritually more than missing the mark, as it were. But that's playing with spiritual fire, as it were."

"Like juggling chainsaws," I suggested.

"An apt metaphor, because dropping one can be spiritually fatal. We live in a society which glorifies sex and denigrates faithfulness."

"Don't worry," I said sarcastically, "society is moving to turn sex into the root of all evil, and that'll happen inside of twenty-five years. It'll be denigrated except when it serves a specific political point."

"That's not the right answer," Father Basil replied. "Sex within the context of marriage is a beautiful, God-given gift."

"That philosophy is one reason it will be attacked. We're already seeing sex demonized in numerous contexts, and it'll get worse. Trust me, it won't be long before we see the equivalent of the 'Junior Anti-Sex League'."

Father Basil smiled, "And you'll be the 'rebel from the waist down'?"

I laughed, "You know your Orwell, which is a good thing."

"The benefits of a good education from Loyola and before that, my High School near Cleveland. How are things at home?"

"The kids are all doing well, and my relationships are solid."

"A significant challenge even for a traditional couple with what amounts to a blended family."

"I would argue that my choices in that regard actually helped stabilize things. I know I don't conform to social norms, but I daresay you object to as many social norms as I do, even if our objections are not identical."

"I suspect you're right. And I suspect we actually agree on many of them, setting aside your marriage. You've raised a fine young man in Jesse and you should be proud. I'm sure your other children are equally mature and responsible, which says something about you."

"And my relationships," I replied. "Don't discount the value of our odd family situation in the kids' success. That goes for Matthew and Michael, who aren't nearly as integrated as the other five kids, but still benefit from it."

"We're going to miss Jesse," Father Basil said as the waiter brought our food.

"For that, I am truly sorry, and I'm sure he'll miss all of you as well."

"OK to pray?"

"Of course."

 Jesse

"That was way tougher than my workouts with the Park District team," Nicholas said when we left the rink with Pete, Jack, and Freddy to go to Ricobene's for lunch.

"You did a great job, Nicholas," Freddy said. "You skated circles around all the other Freshmen."

"Thanks. But I'm beat!"

"Do you work out or run?" Pete asked.

"No," Nicholas replied.

"You should. All of us lift, jump rope, run, or all three."

"If you want to come to my house to work out with me, you can," I said to Nicholas. "I have my own free weights and bench in the Duck's Nest."

"When?"

"It'll depend on when we have practice during the school year. I'll let you know when coach gives us the practice and game schedule."

"Cool!"

"Jesse, what do you think of the newbies?" Pete asked.

"A couple of them look promising," I said. "But after one day, we don't know too much. I've known Nicholas since he was born, so I know how good he is. Whoever makes the team, they have to be disciplined. No more disasters like our semi-final game."

"Ugh," Freddy said. "I just want to forget that nightmare!"

"Don't forget it," I said. "Remember it and vow to not let it ever happen again!"

 Steve

I had just returned from lunch when *adium* notified me of a message.

MissKatelyn85: Hi! You're back, right?"

NIKASteve: Hi! Yes.

MissKatelyn85: Cool! Pick me up from work at 5:15pm?

NIKASteve: Yes. I assumed you'd want that!

MissKatelyn85: Duh! It's been a month!

NIKASteve: Chinese OK?

MissKatelyn85: Absolutely!

NIKASteve: I'll order so it arrives about 6:30pm. We'll be at my house because the apartment is in use.

MissKatelyn85: Cool! Time to...before we eat!

NIKASteve: Sounds like a plan. See you at 1715.

MissKatelyn85: CU!

I texted Kara to let her know that I was seeing Katelyn as I had expected and asked her to let Jessica and Suzanne know. Just over four hours later, I left the office, got into my car, and drove the short distance to Potbelly's where I saw the cute strawberry blonde waiting for me.

"Hi!" Katelyn exclaimed, getting into my BMW.

"Hi!"

"Step on it!" she exclaimed.

I put the car in gear and headed towards the house, as the NIKA apartment was being used.

"How was your July?" I asked.

"I worked and hung out with my friends," she said. "How was Europe?"

"I always enjoy going there and I had a good time."

"I know you made no promises, but how long can this affair continue?"

"That's a good question," I replied. "I've been reevaluating my approach to what my wives and I call 'dalliances' and 'random deflowerings'."

"I fit into both categories, right?"

"Yes. And only because you were over the age of consent."

"I get the impression that in the past, that hasn't mattered to you."

"Let's just say that I believe bodily autonomy is a human right and teenagers are human beings. Well, most of the time; occasionally, they act like aliens!"

Katelyn laughed, "Your kids?"

"One, specifically, who didn't deal well with the onset of puberty."

"So if I had been sixteen?"

"You weren't. I don't like to play 'What if?' games such as that."

"How has your approach changed?"

"Mainly not having extended affairs, to use your term," I replied.

"Was that before or after we were together the first time?"

"It's been a work in progress since the beginning of the year, but obviously I made an exception for you. The question is, for how long? I don't have a specific answer for you, but I'm not saying it needs to end today. It does have to end if you begin dating someone exclusively, but otherwise, I'm not setting a time limit at this point."

"And you're OK with me going to dances or dating and continuing our affair, right?"

"Yes, so long as you don't misrepresent your situation. I'd prefer you didn't reveal our relationship, even in a general way, and there is one firm rule -- if you have sex with anyone, and I mean beyond just kissing, they have to have had a clean STI test or we have to be done. There is no room for maneuver there. Please do not try to finesse it, either, because you'll put your life, my life, and the lives of my wives at stake."

"Wouldn't it just be easier to ask me not to have sex with anyone else?"

"It would, but remember what I said about bodily autonomy? You have to be in control of you."

"And that means you can't ask?"

"The problem is, if I ask, you'll feel compelled to say 'yes', because you'd be concerned I might break things off if you said 'no'. If, on the other hand, you suggest it..."

"It's free will and bodily autonomy."

"Here endeth the lesson."

"Oh, I hope not!" Katelyn exclaimed.

My plans for the evening were completely upset by an enraged Bethany, who came to the door just after Katelyn and I arrived at the house.

"YOU BASTARD!" Bethany screamed, clearly seething.

"I'm pretty sure my parents were married when I was born," I replied calmly.

"DON'T BE A JACKASS! YOU RUINED MY BOOK DEAL!"

"I'm not a donkey, either," I replied. "And I did no such thing. I did not speak to your publisher or agent, nor did I ask anyone to speak to your publisher or agent."

Which was entirely true. Samantha had done it on her own after I'd explained Bethany's proposed revisions.

"BULLSHIT! TOM TOLD YOU ABOUT IT AND YOU USED SOME CONNECTION TO KILL IT BECAUSE YOU WANT TO FUCK TEENAGE GIRLS!"

"What I want to do is irrelevant. I want my kids, and the kids we call the 'cousins', to have a healthy, positive view of sex. Hell, I want the entire country to have a healthy, positive view of sex. That said, I did not speak to your publisher, nor did I speak to your agent. Have I told people about the changes you intended to make to your book which repudiate everything they stood for? Absolutely. Will I do everything possible to keep you from imposing your completely inappropriate views on my kids? Absolutely. Will I encourage my friends to do the same? You can be damned sure."

"YOU SMUG ASSHOLE! THIS IS NOT OVER!"

"Good night, Bethany," I said. "You are not welcome here."

She turned and stormed out the door. I calculated I had about fifteen minutes before Tom showed up at my door, which meant Katelyn was going to be disappointed.

"What was THAT?" Katelyn asked.

"The end of a twenty-five-year friendship," I sighed. "And you're not going to be happy because I'm guessing her husband will be along in about fifteen minutes to talk to me, and it won't surprise me if her best friend calls, or more likely, shows up."

"I know it's probably none of my business, but would you explain?"

"Let's go to my study," I said. "I just need to have a word with my wives."

I led Katelyn to my study, then went to the kitchen where Kara, Suzanne, and Birgit were making dinner.

"That sounded bad," Kara observed after I kissed her and Suzanne on the lips and Birgit on the forehead.

"I suspect you only heard one side," I replied.

"Yes. You seem remarkably calm."

I shrugged, "I knew the blowup was coming."

"What did you do?" Kara asked.

"I told Kathy and Samantha what I learned from Bethany and Tom in Stockholm. But as I said to Bethany, I didn't make any calls or ask anyone to make any calls."

"Because you didn't need to, right?" Suzanne asked. "Samantha did it on her own!"

"Yes. Samantha's dad financed the publisher years ago, before Bethany wrote her book. Samantha picked up the phone, called the publisher, then sent her jet to New York to get him."

"Summoned to a royal audience?" Kara asked.

"That's a good way to put it," I replied. "I'm going to sit in my study with Katelyn because I expect Tom to show up in the next ten minutes or so, and it won't surprise me if Kathy shows up."

"If you want me to take Katelyn home for you, I will," Suzanne offered.

"We'll eat our meal and see how things go," I replied. "Thanks for the offer."

"Bummer for her, Dad!" Birgit teased. "I guess I'm not the only one Loki blocks!"

I wondered if she'd said anything to Kara or Suzanne, but it wasn't my business and I didn't want to give anything away, so I just shook my head in amusement and then went to my study where I explained, briefly, the disagreement between Bethany and me.

"So, even though I'm seventeen, approached you, made it obvious I wanted to have sex with you, this relationship is abusive?"

"That is her take, yes."

"Oh, please! You didn't do anything except order your lunch! I took the initiative. Had I not asked for your card, what would have happened?"

"I'd have paid and been on my way," I replied.

"How is that possibly abusive?" Katelyn asked.

"It's not. And if you follow her thinking to its logical conclusion, only two uneducated virgins, born on the same day, could ever have sex without it being

'abusive'. Or, and this is the other thread that needs to be followed, only pre-approved sex is permitted, and then only in a very specific context. It's Orwellian and Puritanical, which actually fit together as totalitarian and authoritarian governments tend towards the Puritanical. Sadly, we're losing the fight."

"What can you do?"

"What I am doing -- educate as many people as I can and ensure sex-positive resources are available."

I heard the doorbell ring and less than twenty seconds later, Ashley came to the door of the study.

"Nicholas' dad is here," she said.

"Would you take Katelyn next door to the 'Indian' room and then bring Tom here, please?"

"Yes!"

Katelyn went with Ashley and then brought Tom to the study, closing the door after he had come in.

"Do you want a drink?" I asked.

Tom smiled, "I could probably use one. Bourbon will do nicely."

I poured us each a glass of Knob Creek and handed him his. He downed it in one gulp while I sipped mine. I refilled his glass for him, and he simply sipped it.

"Bethany says you denied interfering with her book deal," Tom said.

"I actually said that I hadn't made any phone calls to her publisher or agent, nor did I ask anyone to do it."

"Who called them?"

"Samantha. She has a relationship with the publisher and when I explained what Bethany intended, Samantha, without any encouragement from me, placed the call."

"OK, but you had to know she'd do something like that," Tom replied.

"Actually, I had no idea that Noel Spurgeon had provided financing to the publisher sometime in the late 80s or early 90s, before Bethany wrote her book, which was published in 1998. So while it's true I conveyed the information, I didn't ask or encourage Samantha to do anything. Kathy agrees with my assessment, by the way."

Tom frowned, "You know I can't go against Bethany."

"And I'm not expecting you to."

"Did you actually tell her she wasn't welcome here?"

"I did, and honestly, I don't know what else to do. She has it in her head that my sole motivation is my personal choice of sex partners, and that simply is not the case. She thinks Jesse would be abusing *any* girl he had sex with at this point because of his knowledge and experience. As I said to her in Iron Mountain, in Vermont, and in Stockholm, that's nuts.

"It goes against every single thing she wrote in *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* which is the only sex-positive book for teens of which I'm aware. It goes against the sex-positive themes in *Why Me? A Woman's Guide to Surviving Sexual Abuse, Rape, and*

Incest and equates ALL sex between partners who are not identical in age, knowledge, and experience with rape."

"That seems an extreme understanding of her point," Tom countered.

"Except it's not if you ask her to apply it to Jesse, which was the source of the disagreement. It's subtle, but she says that *any* disparity in 'power', which she defines to include any difference in knowledge, age, and experience, makes consent impossible. Think about your history, and without revealing anything, tell me you never entered into a relationship where there was an age difference, a knowledge difference, or an experience difference."

"I can't, of course."

"And here's one -- when you and Bethany married, was your *knowledge* about sex equal to hers?"

"Of course not."

"Then by Bethany's logic *she* abused *you*."

"Oh, come on!" Tom protested.

"Ask her. Give her a hypothetical situation that is similar to yours, but not identical, and see what she says about 'power disparity' and consent. She made a clear statement to me that Jesse, being with a girl even a year younger who had no experience, was abusive in her mind. And, let's be clear, my relationships with Kara and Jessica would be abusive in Bethany's mind. Think it through, Tom."

He was quiet for a moment, then sighed deeply, and downed his bourbon.

"I'm not sure what to do," he said. "Bethany said she's going to find a new publisher."

"She very likely signed away her rights to her books," I said. "I'd advise reading the contract she has with the publisher. That's been true since the first copyrights were created under Queen Anne with the Copyright Act 1710, also known as the *Statute of Anne*. And I'm fairly sure that would apply to any 'derivative work'. In other words, she can't even write a new book based on the old ones. In other words, she can't simply revise the book without permission. You'd need to contact an intellectual property attorney or copyright expert to be sure, but I went through all of this with NIKA."

"That seems unf...well, you know."

"The publisher, in order to justify the expense of typesetting, printing, marketing, and distributing the work needs guarantees that the author won't dilute their investment by publishing it themselves or with a competing publisher. Without those conditions, Bethany couldn't have published the book nor earned her advances and royalties. Even Tom Clancy and J. K. Rowling assign their copyrights to their publishers. The only way around that is self-publishing, but that's an expensive proposition and limits your market. Bethany's books are in bookstores, which they wouldn't be if they were self-published."

"Is there no recourse?"

"Again, I'm not an attorney, but I believe there is a statutory termination right Bethany could exercise after thirty-five years after publication. That's 2027 for *Why Me?* and 2033 for *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*. And I don't know for sure that she could do it, nor what the procedures would be. Again, you'd need an intellectual property attorney and they are not cheap."

"Well, shit," Tom sighed.

"And it gets worse, Tom. The publisher could have someone else revise the book and still publish it under her name."

"You're joking!"

"No," I replied, "I'm not. That's what assignment of copyright does, unless Bethany had some kind of special agreement, which I am almost positive she didn't. Back then, she told me she'd signed a standard publishing agreement. There are three options -- do nothing; revise the book per the new request from the publisher; hire an attorney. But I'm telling you, as your friend, you'll lose. I've won numerous copyright lawsuits and I understand how they work well enough to know you'd lose after spending a ton of money."

"Is your ban, I guess, permanent?"

"No. And I am not angry with Bethany, nor do I hate her, no matter what she might think. Am I disappointed? Absolutely. Is there a way out of this? I'm sure there is, but that comes down to whether Bethany is willing to move from her extreme position."

The phone on my desk rang, and CallerID showed my prediction to be correct.

"It's Kathy," I said. "Mind if I answer?"

"No. I can leave if you want."

I shook my head, "No need."

I picked up the phone.

"Hi, Red!" I said.

Kathy laughed, "Hi, Steve. I take it you know why I'm calling."

"Tom is here, so I'm sure I do."

"Actually, let me speak to him, please. If there's a way out of this, it's on the two of us to figure it out. As you can imagine, Bethany can't see straight about you at the moment."

"One sec," I said, then looked to Tom, "Kathy wants to talk to you."

"Me?"

"She thinks the two of you might find a way out of the mess, and I'm likely to only enrage Bethany further."

Tom nodded and took the handset from me. He and Kathy spoke briefly, then he handed the receiver to me to put it back in the cradle.

"Lunch tomorrow," Tom said.

"Good. I'm sorry about all of this."

"I'm not sure there was any way to avoid it once she started down that path."

"Sadly, I believe you're correct."

We stood, shook hands, and I walked him to the door. As he left, the Chinese food I'd ordered for Katelyn and me arrived, I tipped the deliveryman, then went to the 'Indian' room to have dinner with Katelyn.

"Is your other friend coming over?"

"No."

"Still in the mood?"

I wasn't, really, but I also didn't want to disappoint Katelyn. I quickly thought it through, then gave my answer.

"Would you be upset if I suggested we wait until next Monday?"

"No."



August 6, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

Each minute of Tuesday morning seemed to take forever as I watched as the clock ticked towards 9:00am, though it was digital, so it actually didn't tick. The instant the '8' changed to a '9' and '59' changed to '00', I dialed Peter's house. They'd arrived home the previous day, but I'd listened to Dad and not called so they could have time to unpack, relax, and get some sleep.

"Kallas Residence," Aunt Julia said.

"Hi!" I exclaimed. "It's Birgit! How was Greece?"

"Warm and sunny! How was Sweden?"

"Not as warm, but plenty of sun! May I speak with Peter, please?"

"He's not out of bed yet. I'll have him call you, OK?"

"Yes, thank you."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, hoping he'd call soon. I needed something to do, so I went to find my sisters.

 Jesse

"I have a small dilemma," Coach Nelson said when he asked to speak to me near the end of a fifteen-minute hydration and bathroom break.

"What's that, coach?" I asked.

"You've been a leader since you first set foot on the ice as a Freshman, and I want to appoint you team captain, but the rules do not allow a goalie to be on-ice captain or alternate. If you designate someone to speak for you, they'll get the 'C', with the understanding that you're the captain."

"Team rules require it to be a Junior or Senior, right?"

"Yes."

"Freddy," I said firmly.

"He was going to be an alternate, so I have no objection. Keep this to yourself. I'll announce it on Friday when I announce the team roster."

"Thanks, Coach! I won't let you down."

"Of that, I'm sure. Hit the ice!"

"Rah!" I said loudly and headed for the door to the ice.

I had known about the rule from the NHL when I'd asked Dad about it. Goalkeepers had used the captaincy to delay games and get what amount to free timeouts for their side by asking for needless or trivial rule interpretations, and taking their time to skate to and from center ice to confer with an official. That had led to a rule change before the 1948-1949 season that prohibited goalkeepers from wearing the 'C' or 'A', though nothing prevented them from being named captain of the team.

It was a huge honor to be team captain, and I'd be able to do the ceremonial stuff, just not on-ice stuff during a game. It also meant that building a winning attitude was as much on me as it was the coaches, and I was determined to do it!

 Matthew

"I can't believe how much these books cost!" Chelsea grouched as we left the Loyola bookstore.

"Captive market and limited print runs," I said. "But even so, \$145 for a basic chemistry book is nuts!"

"Do you think the professors get kickbacks?" Chelsea asked.

"I think that would be illegal," I said. "Well, unless the professor wrote the book and gets royalties, but then I feel it would be unethical to assign it for your class."

"Where's the closest store where I could get my other supplies really cheap?"

"We can look it up in the phone book when we get back to the townhouse," I said. "I know where the places are out by the house, but not in the city."

"Actually, it can wait until we go to your house to hang out with your friends on Friday."

"OK with me," I said. "What are we doing today?"

"Why don't we go to the beach?" Chelsea suggested.

"Oak Street?" I asked.

"It's not Cádiz, but it'll have to do!"

"There's also Indiana Dunes, but we'd need a car to get there, and it would take over an hour each way."

"Oak Street is fine."

"We can have lunch at Billy Goat Tavern beforehand."

"Cool!"

We made our way back to the townhouse, changed into our swimsuits, put on shorts and t-shirts, then headed to Lower Michigan Avenue for lunch at the Billy Goat Tavern.

 Birgit

Peter finally called at 11:40am.

"What are you doing today?" I asked.

"I didn't have any plans," he said.

"How about pizza and *Stuart Little 2*?" I suggested. "And you could come over for the afternoon, if you wanted."

"Let me ask my mom," he said.

I heard a muffled discussion, and he came back to the phone after less than a minute.

"She said it's OK, so long as we make the first showing, so we're back at your house or my house before the city curfew."

"That works! I won't eat a big lunch and we can get pizza around 5:00pm. Why don't you come over at 1:00pm?"

"Sure! See you then."

We said 'goodbye' and I pushed the button to hang up my mobile phone. I had just over an hour, so I went downstairs and ate a quick lunch, then went back to my room with a plan of action in mind. First, I changed the sheets on my bed so they were fresh, then locked the door to my room and stripped off all my clothes.

I took stock in the mirror and was happy with what I saw -- nice boobs, even if they were a bit small, a tight, sexy butt, a flat stomach, and a perfect V of hair pointing to the entrance to paradise! After checking myself out, I went into the bathroom. I carefully trimmed my pubic hair, then got into the shower where I shaved my legs and under my arms, and carefully around my mons to give the V an even more perfect definition.

I scrubbed myself with lavender-scented soap, rinsed the suds from my body, then got out of the shower. I dried myself with a fluffy towel, then brushed my hair. Next I applied deodorant, sprayed myself with lavender body spray, then

brushed my teeth and gargled with mint mouthwash. That completed, then went to my dresser to choose my underwear.

I chose black lace panties and a matching bra, put them on, and checked myself in the mirror. I was happy with how I looked, so I put on tight white shorts and a red peasant blouse that dipped low enough to be enticing but without showing my bra. I completed the look with a pair of white sandals, though we didn't usually wear shoes in the house.

Once I was satisfied, I went to the bathroom and applied just a hint of eye liner and lipstick, brushed my hair once more, then went downstairs to wait for Peter, who arrived just before 1:00pm. I was so tempted to just drag him to my room, but I realized it would be better to spend a bit of time doing something else.

"We have over three hours before we need to leave," I said. "Want to play pool?"

"Sure," he agreed.

We went to the basement, and I turned the stereo to WLUP, then Peter and I uncovered the pool table. I racked the solids and stripes and handed Peter the cue ball. We each selected a cue, and he broke. The game was about evenly matched because Uncle Pete had bought a pool table so he could practice to be able to beat dad, and I managed to sink the 8-ball with Peter having just a single stripe left on the table.

We agreed to play best two out of three, and Peter won the second game, and I won the third, with both games being really close. We put our cues away and covered the table.

"What now?" Peter asked.

"We could listen to music in my room," I suggested.

"I, uhm, er, guess so," he stammered.

"I promise not to bite!" I giggled, taking his hand and feeling a tingle between my legs.

I led him up the two flights and stairs and to my room where I shut and locked the door before I put on *This Is the Remix* by Destiny's Child, an album I really liked that had remixes of their songs from previous albums, some of which were actually better than the originals. I turned up the volume, then went to sit on the love seat.

Peter was still standing by the door, obviously nervous, so I patted the cushion next to me and smiled at him. He came over and sat down, and I took his hand. It was sweaty and I could tell his heart was racing, and I reminded myself what had happened with Ed in Vermont because the last thing I wanted to do was scare Peter away!

"You can kiss me," I said quietly.

Peter turned his head, and I allowed him to press his lips against mine. The first kiss was just simple touching of lips, but when he kissed me a second time, I parted my lips and touched the tip of my tongue to Peter's lips. He parted his lips, and our tongues touched. I shivered just a bit, and I was sure there was a damp spot on my panties that would only get bigger.

After a minute, I broke the kiss and whispered, "It's OK to put your hand under my shirt."

It was easier this time because, unlike the polo shirt I'd been wearing the last time, when we'd been interrupted by the smoke alarm, I'd been wearing a tucked-in polo. I moaned when I felt his finger touch my stomach and threatened

Loki with white hot death if anything prevented Peter from getting his hand on my boob.

The threat worked, because Peter and I French kissed I felt him cup my boob. He squeezed, and I was SO tempted to put my hand on what I was sure was a raging erection, but I didn't want him to cum in his pants and be embarrassed. Our tongues danced and swirled for about a minute before I broke the kiss.

"Do you want to see them?" I asked quietly.

Peter nodded, and I felt his pulse quicken even more and thought he might cum even without me touching him! He moved his hand from under my blouse and I pulled it over my head and tossed it on the arm of the loveseat next to me. I reached around my back, unhooked my bra, pushed the straps from my shoulders and let it fall into my lap.

"Wow!" Peter breathed, his voice barely above a whisper.

"You can touch them," I offered, putting the bra on top of my blouse.

Peter tentatively put his hands forward and gently put them on my boobs. I put my hands over his and pressed them into my boobs, which caused my nipples to harden and press into Peter's palms. I leaned forward so we could kiss and our tongues tangled as Peter began gently massaging my chest. I moved my hands to his shoulders, despite desperately wanting to feel his erection. I was so excited, I was positive I was going to soak through both my panties and my shorts!

"I want you to kiss them," I said when we broke the kiss.

Peter nodded, moved his hands from my chest and lowered his head. I leaned back and when his lips grazed my nipple, I shuddered and moaned.

"Suck my nipple," I begged.

When Peter's tongue touched my nipple I groaned. It was obviously the first time he'd done this, but it felt really good, and I couldn't wait until I could turn him into Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater! But that would wait for something else.

"I want to suck you," I breathed.

VIII. Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater

August 6, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

A hitch in Peter's breath was all I needed to know to show that he wanted me to suck him as much as I wanted to do it. I stood up and pulled off my shorts, leaving just my sexy black lace panties, then pulled Peter's t-shirt over his head. I tossed it on the pile of clothes where I'd just tossed my shirt, then had him stand up. I quickly removed his shorts and briefs, allowing his dick to spring free. It was a nice size, and with him being only fourteen, I was sure it would get bigger, maybe a lot bigger, as he got older.

I gently pushed Peter back onto the love seat, knelt between his legs, and planted a kiss on the head of his dick. Peter groaned and a blast of cum landed on my nose and dripped to my lips. I quickly took him into my mouth, sucking and swirling my tongue as hot, sticky cum jetted into my mouth. After the final spurt, I swallowed, then slowly took Peter into my mouth about halfway, then ran my tongue around his dick as I released him.

"Uhm, sorry," Peter said.

I almost laughed because he had shot faster than Dad's five seconds his first time!

I smiled, "It's OK! You were just super-excited! If we wait five minutes, I'll do it again and you'll last longer."

"You, uhm, have my stuff on your face."

"I do, and I want to kiss you now!"

"But..." Peter protested.

"Want me to use my mouth on you again?" I asked sweetly.

Peter nodded.

"It'll cost you a French kiss!"

Peter looked like he might be ill, but when I licked my lips and looked at his dick, I could see in his eyes that he'd accept the kiss. I moved my face close to his, our lips touched, then our tongues, and I grasped Peter's deflated dick with my hand and began stroking. I broke the kiss, then licked both of Peter's nipples, causing him to groan and his dick to begin to harden. I lowered my head to his groin and began what I hoped would be a much longer blowjob.

It was, with Peter lasting almost ten minutes before he groaned and spurted into my mouth. I swallowed his cum, then French kissed him. I was certain now that when we fucked, he'd last a long time because he'd already cum twice. But now it was my turn! I stood up, smiled at Peter, then pulled off my panties. I tossed them on the pile of clothes, then did a slow pirouette so he could see my sexy body.

"I want you to lick me," I said sexily.

"I, er, uhm, don't really know what to do," Peter said.

"I'll teach you!" I said, sitting down. "Kneel between my legs."

Peter nodded and moved between my legs. I scootched my butt forward to the edge of the love seat, then spread my legs. Peter's eyes went wide as he saw my fully exposed pussy, but I wasn't done with 'Show and Tell'!

"These are my pussy lips," I said, running my fingers over my labia.

Peter stared, and I realized he wasn't breathing!

"Breathe, Peter!" I said.

He shook his head as if to clear it and took a couple of breaths.

"This," I said, using my fingers to part my labia, and my other hand to move the skin over my clit up towards my stomach, "is my clitoris. It's super sensitive, like the head of your dick, and if you lick it, you'll make me cum."

Peter sucked in his breath and simply stared at me. I had one more thing to show him, though.

"And," I said, carefully spreading my labia so he could see the entrance to my tunnel, "after you make me cum with your tongue, you'll get to put your dick here and we'll fuck!"

Peter gulped and nodded.

"Use your tongue, please, and make me cum," I said sweetly.

Peter nodded and lowered his head and tentatively licked my labia. After a few licks, he pressed his tongue between them and when the tip touched my clit, I let out a soft moan. At first, Peter was tentative, but with a bit of encouragement and suggestions about how to make me cum, he did. I wanted his dick in me, so after that orgasm, I took his hand and led him to my bed.

"On your back," I requested, "because I need to get you hard."

Pater got into bed and I climbed in, but turned so that my pussy was over his face.

"Lick me while I suck you," I said, pushing my pussy onto his lips as I took his semi-soft dick into my mouth.

It didn't take very long for Peter to get hard, and when he was, I lifted up, turned, and straddled Peter's thighs. I grasped his dick, slick with my saliva, and held it straight up. I shifted so that my pussy was directly over it, rubbed it along my labia, positioned it at my entrance, then slowly sunk down, watching Peter's face the entire time. He filled me very nicely, and when my pubic hair touched his, I leaned forward and put my lips to his ear.

"You aren't a virgin any longer!" I whispered excitedly.

I moved my head so we could kiss and I began moving up and down and back and forth, enjoying the feel of Peter's rock-hard dick sliding in and out of my tight pussy. I ground my clit against Peter's pubic bone every time I took him completely inside me, and it felt REALLY good.

It didn't take long for the feeling in the pit of my stomach to build, and I groaned when my pussy spasmed around Peter's throbbing shaft. I gave myself two more orgasms before I began moving faster and squeezing my muscles. Peter broke the kiss, gasping for breath, and a minute later, groaned loudly as he blasted cum into my pussy, which caused me to groan and spasm as we orgasmed together. When both our orgasms finished, I stretched out on top of Peter and rested my head on his shoulder while both of us caught our breath.

"Want to do it again?" I asked about five minutes later.

Peter nodded and grinned, "Yes!"

"Then I'll suck you and you can lick me until I get you hard."

"But I shot in you," he protested.

"Want to do it again or not?" I asked sweetly.

Peter nodded slowly, and I moved so we could use our mouths on each other.

 Jesse

"Did you decide on a day for the party?" Angelina asked when she arrived at my house after cheer practice.

"What about the 17th?" I asked. "I thought about the 24th, but that's Ashley's birthday and I'm sure my dad and his wives have plans."

"That's a Saturday, right?"

"Yes."

"Then let's invite everyone! How many people can fit into the sauna?"

"Not forty, that's for sure!" I declared. "Even if people sat on the floor and some on each other's laps, that would be almost impossible. Not to mention the trouble we had last year about it. Even if everyone wore bathing suits, some parent would lose their shit and say we were lying."

"Why are adults so dumb?" Angelina asked.

"Because they're afraid," I replied. "Fundamentally, adults are driven by fear. It's something I've discussed with my dad and my moms. The only way to fix it is for all of us to not be afraid and to do our best to prevent others from acting based on irrational fear. That's one reason we have the Hangouts and why my dad has his Philosophy Club. We'll start the Hangouts once school starts again."

"Afraid of what?"

"Everything! *Dungeons & Dragons*, 'stranger danger', sex offenders, drugs, crime, people of different races, people of different religions, people from different countries. Politicians stoke fear to get elected, and promise Draconian sentences for crimes for the same reason. Adults are even becoming afraid of Free Speech these days, and it's getting worse!"

"Why aren't your parents afraid?"

"Because they refused to give in to fear and taught us the same thing. The world is an interesting place, and exploring it is risky. But to enjoy life, you have to accept that risk or you'd never leave your house!"

"Think we could use the sauna and whirlpool?"

"We could! My muscles are a bit sore from practice."

 Birgit

Peter licked me while I sucked him to get him hard, but this time, I got on my back and spread my legs wide. Peter moved between them, grasped his shaft, rubbed the head of his dick along my pussy lips, then slowly started pushing into me. When he was all the way in, I wrapped my legs around Peter's thighs, and my arms around his back.

"Fuck me!" I demanded.

Peter began moving, and I waited, allowing him to figure out how to do it. Once he was regularly thrusting, I began moving with him, enjoying the feeling of his hard dick moving inside me.

"Fuck me harder!" I demanded a few minutes later.

Peter did, and I moved my hips harder and faster, and after a minute I had a small orgasm, then three minutes later, another. After another two minutes, I felt Peter twitch, and I knew he was close.

"HARD!" I growled.

I tightened my arms and legs and wildly thrust my hips upward as Peter slammed into me. I held my breath and when Peter groaned and slammed into me, his hot cum pushed me over the edge and I came hard, my pussy spasming around Peter's dick. I groaned loudly and ground against Peter as his cum bathed my insides.

Peter basically collapsed on top of me, putting his head on the pillow, and I kept my arms and legs wrapped around his sweaty body. He'd made me feel really good, and Loki had finally been vanquished so that I could fuck in my own bed! And I was going to do it a lot!

"You remember when you asked what I thought was funny?"

"Yes. What?"

I giggled, then said, "Once you put your mouth on my pussy, you became 'Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater'!"

Peter groaned, "You are SO bad, Birgit!"

"I am!" I exclaimed. "Let's take a shower, then we can leave for pizza and the movie."

"Wouldn't you rather stay here and keep doing this?" Peter asked.

Would I?! Would I?! Was he kidding?!"

"YES!" I exclaimed.

 Steve

"Thanks for meeting me for dinner," Ben said.

"Ask," I replied with a grin.

"Am I that transparent?" Ben asked with a smile.

"I should say 'yes', but I had lunch with Samantha last Friday and she asked for a favor."

"Because she knew you would have said 'No' without her personal request."

"Damn straight! I will accept another two-year term commencing in January, but that's the last one. That'll be twelve years, and there are shorter sentences for serious crimes!"

"You've done some very good work and made some valuable contacts."

"All true," I replied. "But I feel my work is done. The Foundation is in good hands with you at the helm, Samantha will keep her seat, and the other directors

are very good. I will be more than happy to help find my replacement when the time comes."

"Any thoughts?"

I smiled slyly, "Tatyana Ivanovna Grigoryeva, of course."

Ben nodded, "I'm not surprised."

"A stellar CV, diplomatic credentials, an educator, and with more contacts than I could ever dream of."

"That's not true and you know it!"

"She can pick up the phone and have a reasonable chance of getting high-ranking government officials on the phone. As distasteful as I find speaking to the government, I couldn't do it if I wanted it. My ḥarīm, as you've occasionally referred to it, makes me *persona non grata* with bureaucrats and elected officials. You know the trouble it's caused in the past, even with lower-level business contacts."

"And the jealousy it's caused amongst attorneys when they see the women! Is your collection complete?"

"There has been, from the time I was a teenager, a group of three women, with fluctuating membership, who have, in effect, helped me manage my life and care for me. The first time it was formalized, it was given the appellation 'Triumvirate' and Kara was a member. With the exception of a difficult year we had not long after her father died, she's consistently been a part of it. It took the past twenty years to finally find two other women who could fulfill their roles and help me live a stable, fulfilling life."

"I've known you for fifteen years now, and that's the first time I ever heard the broad philosophical underpinnings of your complex relationships."

"It's not something we share with many people," I replied. "And you know we've become more circumspect about discussing our family with any outsiders. Society has lost the thread on minding one's own business, and sadly I don't think we'll return to a time when people 'live and let live'. Instead, it's more 'live and let die'."

"James Bond or Paul McCartney references aside, I don't disagree with you."

"Global, instantaneous communication is a double-edged sword," I replied. "As Mark Twain is purported to have said -- 'A lie goes around the world while truth is still putting on its boots'. In Twain's day, the best you could do was telegraph, and that was, for the most part, point to point, though 'wireless' was invented by Marconi about fifteen years before Twain's death. Now, those lies are amplified and broadcast to the globe, and it's nearly impossible to counter them."

"I know you too well that you can't possibly be calling for censorship!"

"Of course not. The liar has just as much right to speak as the truth-teller. I'm simply acknowledging that the technology which makes global, instantaneous communication possible has a downside. In a sense, though, the only difference between now and the heyday of 'Yellow Journalism' is speed and reach. Hearst and Pulitzer had to print and distribute physical media, and yet managed to whip up public sentiment across a wide swath of the country."

"So, what would you do?"

"As always, it starts with proper education and proper training in critical thinking. We've lost that thread, too. And it's going to get worse because they're tying federal funding to standardized test results. Federal money is, and always

has been, a poison pill for state and local government, including school boards. Once you take it, you're stuck with whatever lunacy Washington chooses to impose, something only possible because the 17th Amendment denied the *States* their equal representation in the Senate."

"But not without their consent," Ben countered. "The Amendment was ratified."

"No, actually, it wasn't," I countered. "It was certified without unanimous agreement because people felt keeping two Senators per state satisfied that requirement. It did not, because the senators now represent the *people* not the *state*."

"An interesting theory, and one I'll leave you to debate with ConLaw professors! That is way outside my area of expertise."

"Mine, too," I chuckled. "But that doesn't stop me from opining!"

"No kidding," Ben said dryly.



August 7, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Do you have any idea why my mom would be talking to a lawyer about your dad?" Nicholas asked when I picked him up on Wednesday morning.

"No clue," I replied as I pulled away from the curb in front of his house. "Well, I suspect it has something to do with whatever they fought about in Sweden."

"Mom's book, I think," Nicholas replied. "Something about updating it."

I suppressed a groan, because it dawned on me what it was about, and it had started several years ago when Nicholas' mom had suddenly decided it wasn't OK for me to have sex, though I was fairly sure her *real* problem was with my dad. Whatever else was true, Aunt Bethany had always wanted to be married to my dad, but simply couldn't handle the relationship on his terms. And the fight had led to the 'Welcome Home' party that had been planned being canceled.

"If she's doing that update along the lines of the conversation she and my dad had a few years ago in Michigan, then it's going to be ugly. And no matter how many lawyers your mom speaks to, Dad has more. A lot more. She hasn't said anything about you hanging out with me or playing hockey, has she?"

"No," Nicholas replied. "She did say she felt it was better that Stephie and I had broken up."

"Of course," I replied, suppressing a sigh. "It's Francesca all over again."

"What happened? I mean, I know you broke up, and she moved away, but why?"

I considered how much I should reveal to Nicholas and decided I could tell him part of it.

"Her mom freaked out because we started kissing in a serious way, and it spiraled out of control from there."

Nicholas smirked, "'Kissing' the way you guys meant it when we were younger?"

I laughed, "That was her mom's fear, but honestly, her mom began to lose it when Francesca got her period and we kissed for real, rather than those little kid kisses the boy and girl cousins gave each other."

"She moved because of that?"

"Yes. First she said we couldn't see each other because she was afraid Francesca and I were going to go 'all the way', but then she moved to Naperville, and finally to Iowa, so we couldn't see each other. That's when Francesca ran away and came here, and Uncle Pete saved my butt. She ran away again, and that's when the shit hit the fan and her mom was arrested."

"She's living here now, right?"

"Yes, with her dad, but it's over. Things changed so much and there were so many problems that the relationship didn't survive."

"Did you guys..."

"That's something we should never talk about. It's always wrong to brag, and it's always wrong to reveal something so private. If you do need to talk about it with someone, a girl is best, rather than a guy."

"But you've done it, right?"

"Yes, and I can talk to you about anything except who I've been with. You can probably guess, but you shouldn't. When the time comes, if you need advice, I'll give it, but I don't want to know names."

"The guys on the team talk about the girls they've been with."

"Which is totally rude and offensive. If you hear that, you tell the guys to keep it quiet. The other thing to remember is that the guys who talk the most are likely the biggest liars. All it can do is give the girl a bad reputation because of how stupid society is about sex."

"Do you think I could come to your Hangouts when they start again?"

"I think it would be OK, even though you're a year younger than most Freshmen, but I'm concerned about your mom."

"All I can do is ask her, but I wanted to make sure it was OK with you."

"It is. I'll let Birgit know."

"Thanks. How does Coach make cuts?"

"He'll speak to each person individually, so as not to embarrass anyone. You'll make the cut for sure, because of the fifteen forwards who are trying out, you're no worse than tenth, and two of the guys you're better than made the team last year. You'll make fourth line for sure, and maybe third. Just keep doing what you've been doing."

 Steve

"Steve," Kimmy said over the intercom just before 9:00am, "Dave is here to see you."

"Send him in," I replied.

Dave changed shoes and came into the office.

"What's up?"

"A word in private, if you don't mind."

"I know when I'm not wanted!" Penny faux groused. "I'll go check on snacks in the Annex!"

She left, and Dave closed the glass doors.

"Problems?" I asked.

"I was curious if you knew that Birgit and Peter are spending a lot of time together."

"I know they've gone out a few times," I replied, "but I'm going to guess by 'spending a lot of time together' you're concerned about hormones. I'm not."

"I'm not sure I could be that mellow about my fourteen-year-old daughter having a boyfriend, or whatever it is the kids are calling it."

"God gave you two boys for a reason, Dave," I chuckled. "What's your concern?"

"They're fourteen, and that's awfully young to be contemplating sex."

"Tell me YOU didn't think about sex at fourteen!"

"OK, yes, but there's a difference between thinking about it all the time and actually contemplating doing it."

"Dave, do you think for one minute you could control Peter or I could control Birgit in that regard? Could your High School girlfriend's parents have stopped her? Or could your parents have stopped you?"

"No, of course not, but that doesn't mean it's not a concern."

"We've done what we can," I replied. "The kids are fully informed and know about 'safe sex'. At this point, it's up to them. Obviously, if you want to have a

word with Peter about it, that's your prerogative, but I'm confident in Birgit's ability to make good decisions in that regard. What did Julia say?"

"What you would expect; she basically agrees with you."

"Let the kids live their lives, Dave. That's what you and I wanted most as teenagers."

"My perspective might have changed a bit since then," Dave said. "Something about experience and responsibility."

"And I trust Peter and Birgit to be responsible. And to learn from their experiences just as we did."

"Julia said you'd respond exactly that way, and I guess I knew it. I won't interfere, but that doesn't alleviate my concerns."

"Don't take my permissiveness for lack of care or concern," I replied. "You know what would happen to anyone who hurt Birgit."

"Their life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel."

"Exactly."

 Birgit

"My dad was a bit weird this morning when I said I was coming here again today," Peter said when he showed up at the house.

"You hang out here a lot," I said, taking his hand and leading him towards the stairs.

"With Albert, Nicholas, or Jesse," Peter replied. "Not with you!"

I giggled as we began climbing the stairs, "He's afraid we're going to do what we did yesterday!"

"Your parents are totally cool with it, though, right?"

"They believe it's up to me, so long as I use birth control and everyone is tested for STIs, which both of us were."

"You obviously had done it before yesterday."

"Yes," I replied as we went into my room. "But that was to both our advantages!"

"I wasn't complaining!" Peter declared. "I'm not a complete idiot!"

I laughed, "No, that's my dad! He's the «jävla idiot», according to Katt Sundström! You aren't *quite* as dumb as the average boy!"

"Thanks, I think," Peter said.

"Get your clothes off, I'll give you a blowjob so you can last longer, then we'll fuck until lunchtime!"

Peter grinned and had his clothes off in record time. I took my clothes off, led Peter to the couch, and knelt between his legs. Peter lasted close to five minutes this time, and after I'd swallowed his cum, we kissed and moved to the bed, where we fooled around for nearly three hours before going to the shower.

"Are we a couple?" Peter asked as I used some Irish Spring soap I'd taken from the supplies in the hall closet.

"I think we're friends with benefits," I replied. "Or fuck buddies! I don't want a boyfriend right now. Is it a problem if we hang out and have lots of sex?"

"I'm not a complete idiot!" Peter declared again.

"Then you can have as many blowjobs as you can handle, as much fucking as you can handle, and as much of anything else as you can handle!"

"What do you mean?" Peter asked.

"You read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*, right?"

"Sure. We all have."

"I'll do anything in the book with you!"

"I think I'm going to have to read it again!" Peter declared.

One thing was certain -- Peter and I were going to have a LOT of fun together!

 Ashley

"Are they doing what I think they're doing?" Stephie asked when we saw Birgit and Peter go downstairs.

"Probably," I replied. "But so what? It's their business, not ours. And you were planning on doing it with Nicholas on your fourteenth birthday!"

"Yeah, well, the chances he'll be allowed to touch *that* are zero! He's an idiot!"

"Most teenage boys are," I replied. "But Nicholas isn't as bad as you think. You just let your hormones take over and turn you into an alien life form!"

Stephie rolled her eyes, "Mr. Felipe is so weird!"

"No way! He's totally cool! And he was right about the way you were acting. Your trip to Ohio improved your attitude."

"Because Nicholas wasn't there!"

"I think it's more than that," I said. "You needed time away from all of us. Everyone else does it -- Dad, Mom, Kara Mom, Suzanne, Jesse, and Albert all have time away from the family."

"You don't."

I giggled, "I enjoy living in the zoo as an observer! I just don't let anything bother me and have fun watching everyone else! It's amazing what you find out by being quiet, watching, and listening!"

"Nothing seems to bother you."

"Why should I let it? If you allow people to bother you, they're in control. Kara Mom said it took a long time for Dad to figure that out about Grandma Adams. As long as she bothered him, she was actually in control because he always thought about what she would think. Now, he doesn't care, and he's free of her."

"How did you figure all this out? You aren't even ten!"

"I'm quiet, I watch, I listen, I ask the right questions, and I don't let anything bother me!"

"You're more like my mom than your mom," Stephie observed. "Minus the quiet part!"

"Nobody is quiet except Albert! Well, Michael to a point, but Albert is 'squared away' as the Navy guys call it."

"Albert is *weird!*"

"Just like the rest of us! Let's go have lunch!"

"OK."



August 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

When I woke up on Thursday morning, I showered and dressed, then ate breakfast, still contemplating if I should fulfill Viktoria's request. From our 'petting' sessions, I was positive she'd be fun and enthusiastic, but I was a bit concerned about whether she was mature enough to have a purely physical relationship that might not continue.

Despite what Viktoria had said, I wasn't sure she'd actually internalized what that meant. We'd have to talk, which might end up with Viktoria extremely frustrated with me, but I'd rather have that than end up with her thinking we were going to be a couple when we weren't. I had to be convinced that was true before we did anything, but we'd have about forty minutes in the car to talk after I picked her up.

I'd arranged with Aunt Jessica to use her BMW, as dad needed his for work, and went out to the car just after 7:00am because I'd be driving during rush hour, though going in generally the opposite direction. Traffic was moderate, and I

arrived about fifteen minutes early, but when I drove into the circle, I saw Viktoria was already there. She hopped up and hurried to the car and got in.

"Hi!" she exclaimed as she buckled her seat belt.

"Hi," I replied.

"This is a different BMW," she observed.

"It belongs to my Aunt Jessica. Normally, I drive my dad's BMW, but he needed it today."

"I have my test paper and my prescription to show you! And I took my pills every day! I've wanted to do this since that day in the park when you made me feel so good!"

"And that's enough reason to be OK with not being a virgin on your wedding night?"

"That's what my dad wants! It's not up to him! I read that book you told me about, too."

Viktoria had gone into full rebellion against her dad, which was the opposite of how she'd been when I'd first met her years ago. There was no doubt in my mind about what she wanted, it was only a matter of what happened afterwards.

"So long as you know there are no promises beyond today."

I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Viktoria roll her eyes.

"That is what 'no strings' means, you blockhead! I told you that I want you to fuck my brains out with no strings and no conditions! I did say that I hope you'll

like it enough to want to do it again! And that I'm sure I will after what we already did! If you're just going to talk and talk and never believe what I say, then take me home!"

Any doubts or concerns I had vanished, and I mentally cursed the traffic on the inbound Ike.

 Steve

"Steve, I have Robert Rhodes, an attorney, on the phone for you," Kimmy announced over the intercom just before 9:00am.

"Put him through, please," I requested.

The phone trilled, and I picked up the handset.

"Steve Adams," I said.

"Mr. Adams, my name is Robert Rhodes and I represent Doctor Bethany Krajick, whose legal name is Bethany Quinn. Do you have a moment to speak with me?"

"Not without my attorney," I replied. "And I'll need you to tell me enough details to know which of the dozen attorneys I have on retainer I'll need."

"She believes you've interfered with her contract with her publisher."

"That sounds like a mix of contract law and intellectual property law. Let me have your contact information, and I'll have my attorneys call you to set up a conference."

"If you feel that is necessary," he said.

"It's Bethany who appears to feel it's necessary," I replied.

"Then let me give you my contact information."

He did, I wrote it down, read it back to him, then picked up the phone and called Jacob Goldberg. I quickly explained to him the phone call from Robert Rhodes and the events which had led up to it.

"I'd like to use Philip Lache for the contracts side," I said. "I can give you his number."

"I have it; Phil and I play poker together. This sounds fairly straight forward and with the caveat I haven't seen the claims, simple to dispose of. As you know, though, the devil is always in the details. I'll give Phil a call and set up a time to speak to Mr. Rhodes. I'd advise you not to speak to Doctor Krajick until this matter is resolved."

"Understood."

I thanked him, we said 'goodbye', and I hung up.

"What the fuck?" Penny asked. "How can she repudiate that book? It's exactly what I needed to have read when I was twelve or thirteen."

I chuckled, "You didn't need any books, Penelope!"

"FIVE!" she exclaimed.

 Jesse

When we arrived at the Compound I parked, and Viktoria and I got out of the car. We walked to the back door of the coach house, I used my key to let us in,

then closed and locked the door behind us. We both took off our shoes, then I took Viktoria's hand and led her up the stairs to my room. Once we were in my room, I shut the door, even though my moms weren't home and wouldn't be home until after Viktoria and I left late in the afternoon.

Viktoria surprised me by pulling her polo shirt over her head, revealing a plain white cotton bra. She tossed the shirt onto my desk, then without hesitation unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans and pushed them down, leaving her in just her bra and matching plain white cotton panties, and her ankle socks. I followed suit, pulling off my polo shirt, then stripping off my jeans, leaving only my black briefs and crew socks.

"I haven't seen one except on babies when I babysit," Viktoria said.

I bent down, and took off my socks, then stood up again.

Viktoria rolled her eyes, took off her own socks, then put her hands on her hips and looked expectantly at me. I quickly stripped off my briefs, releasing my semi-erect dick. I stood up straight, then tossed the briefs onto the pile of clothes. Viktoria's eyes went wide, and she sucked in her breath.

"Whoa!" she breathed. "It's huge!"

She looked me up and down, then reached around and unhooked her bra. She pushed the straps from her shoulders and let it fall away, revealing firm, round boobs with bright pink nipples. She dropped the bra on top of my briefs, then quickly stripped off her panties, tossing them onto the desk to complete the pile of clothing, revealing a tangle of blonde pubic hair.

I held out my arms and Viktoria took three steps forward, melting against me and moaning softly. I wrapped my arms tightly around her and our lips met, then our tongues. As we kissed, Viktoria flexed her hips, grinding her mons

against my hip as my erection strained to rise. I shifted a bit, allowing it to rise between us, then put my hands on Viktoria's tight butt cheeks, enjoying the feel of her soft pubic hair on my shaft.

"Jesse," Viktoria whispered after breaking the kiss. "Make me feel really good!"

I released her from my arms, took her hand, and led her to the bed.

 Birgit

Peter had to do some things with his Scout troop, and Albert was with him, so I invited Tiffany, Julie, Laurie, Hannah, Leslie, Cynthia, Missy, Naomi, Lilibeth, and Rachel to the house to hang out for the day. Leslie and Laurie arrived first, then the others trickled in over the next thirty minutes, with Rachel arriving last because she had to come from the Gold Coast, where Samantha had her condo.

"How are things with your mom?" I asked Rachel as everyone went up to the attic room.

"I haven't heard from her in two months," Rachel replied. "And that's fine with me. If she ever chills out, I'd be fine with seeing her and talking to her, but unless she gets help, I don't see that happening."

"What is it with crazy parents?" Laurie asked.

"Trouble at home?" Tiffany inquired.

"I made the mistake of mentioning I thought a guy I met when we were on vacation in Florida was 'hot'," Laurie said, "and from that point on, Mom didn't let me out of her sight."

"My dad was 'concerned'," Leslie said, "because I was hanging out with a guy and his girlfriend who just graduated from High School. He felt they were 'too old' to be friends and that they would 'corrupt' me."

I laughed, "Didn't he say something like that about my parents?"

"Yes, but he thinks you're a mature, intelligent, responsible young woman despite what he calls the 'bizarre family situation'."

"You sure have him fooled, Birgit!" Naomi declared.

"How so?" I asked. "What he said is true! Of course, what he doesn't know is that I'm not a virgin!"

"Like THAT wasn't going to happen this summer!" Naomi exclaimed. "The guy you like in Sweden?"

"Yes, though he wasn't the first person to get to third base, as my parents call it."

That had actually been Lilibeth, but there was no way I was going to reveal our secret.

"You hussy!" Laurie teased.

"There is no feeling like a tongue on your clit!" I exclaimed. "You should try it!"

"I'm not ready for that yet," she replied.

"I am!" Leslie exclaimed.

"Me, too!" Tiffany declared. "But I need the perfect guy!"

I knew who she meant, and I hoped she didn't say anything, or she'd not only miss her chance, but likely cause trouble for my dad.

"Ditto!" Naomi declared.

"Been there, done that," Lilibeth declared.

"Who's better, guys or girls?" Julie asked.

"I have zero interest in guys," Lilibeth replied. "Not even to experiment. Would you do that with a girl?"

"Maybe," Julie said. "I like guys, but I might with the right girl just to see what it was like."

"Ewww!" Laurie exclaimed.

"No judging," I said firmly. "Just because you wouldn't do it, doesn't mean there's anything wrong with it."

Julie's comment gave me an idea of how to do one of the things described in *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*. I wondered if she'd go for it.

IX. I'm Happy For You

August 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Oh my God, Jesse!" Viktoria gasped. "Keep doing that!"

"I thought you wanted me to fuck your brains out," I teased.

"Shut up and put your tongue to better use!" she demanded.

After suckling her nipples, I'd moved my head between her thighs and used my mouth to give her a really good orgasm. I'd been about to move up so we could fuck, but Viktoria was having none of it! Not that I minded, because I liked how she tasted, and I was positive I'd be inside her soon enough.

I brought her off twice more with my tongue before moving on top of her. I grasped my shaft, rubbed the head of my dick along her sopping wet pussy lips, then pushed hard into her. Viktoria thrust her hips upwards, allowing me to bury myself in her silky tunnel in a single forceful stroke. She groaned as our pubic hair meshed, and I savored the feeling of her tight pussy around my dick, having felt just the slightest resistance as I'd entered her.

Viktoria threw her arms and legs around me, flexed her hips, and growled, "Fuck my brains out!"

I was more than happy to oblige and began fucking Viktoria forcefully with her meeting every thrust by pushing her hips upwards. It didn't take long before we

were both breathing too hard to kiss, so I put my head next to hers and did my best to fuck her brains out as she'd requested.

Over the next ten minutes she had three orgasms, each stronger than the previous one, and I enjoyed the intense pleasure of her pussy spasming around my shaft as I fucked her. When I brought her off for a fourth time and pushed deep into her and groaned as my cum blasted into her.

"Wow!" Viktoria gasped when our orgasms had run their course.

I gently pulled out, moved to my back next to her, both of us sweaty and breathing heavily.

"How soon can you go again?" she asked a few minutes later.

"Less than ten minutes," I replied. "Sooner, with some help!"

Viktoria laughed softly, "My mouth?"

"Yes!" I declared.

"Fuck my brains out again and you can have your blowjob!"

"I was actually just referring to helping me get hard faster," I replied. "But I'm not going to turn down a blowjob!"

I did as she asked, and she did as she promised, enthusiastically sucking me, allowing me to cum in her mouth, and swallowing before we French kissed. A third energetic fuck was followed by a fun shower, and then we went downstairs for lunch.

 Steve

Jacob Goldberg called back mid-afternoon.

"I don't usually say things like this," he replied, "but both Phil and I believe this is a slam-dunk dismissal. You complaining about the changes to Ms. Spurgeon, and her exercising influence on the publisher, which had zero effect on Doctor Krajick's contract, is not tortuous interference with contract. And given she can't show any damages, she can't get to first base in a suit. If the publisher's contract, a copy of which I requested from Mr. Rhodes, is standard, then she assigned all rights in her books to the publisher.

"In addition, with no public statements by you or Ms. Spurgeon, there would be no defamation claims of any kind, not that you've said anything defamatory from best we can tell. Neither Phil nor I can come up with any theory that would work for her. Our advice is simply to decline to speak to Mr. Rhodes. I'll convey that to him if he wishes and invite him to bring suit if he feels it necessary."

"What about speaking with Bethany?" I asked.

"For now, I'd advise against it. Your best bet is to wait and see what, if anything, she does."

"What should I do if she calls?" I asked.

"Decline to speak to her until the threat of a suit is past. Of course, the only way for that to be true would be for her to sign an unconditional release for you and Ms. Spurgeon for anything to do with this incident. I doubt her attorney would permit that."

"There's one small complication, though it's a few years off."

"What's that?"

"There's a good chance our kids will marry in about ten years."

"I think we can leave that one for the future. I take it you want to restore a cordial relationship with her?"

"I do, though for that to happen she's going to have to change her thinking, and I'm not sure that's going to be any time soon."

"OK. As I said, I'll speak to Mr. Rhodes again, and let him know you decline to speak with him and that he should contact me about any matters he might wish to address."

"Thanks, Jacob."

We said 'goodbye' and I returned the receiver to the cradle, then got back to work with Penny.

 Birgit

"Got a sec?" I asked Julie late in the afternoon when the gathering began to break up so my friends could go home.

"Sure," she said.

We waited until the other girls had left, then went to my room.

"What's up?" Julie asked.

"What you said before, about experimenting," I said. "Were you serious?"

"Why?"

"I want to have a threesome with a guy and a girl," I said.

"Wait!" Julie gasped. "You would?! With a girl?!"

"I already did!" I giggled. "Before I was with Kjell, I had my own experiment."

"And you liked it?"

"It felt great, though I'm sure I prefer guys. But in a threesome, I would, you know, to have fun all around."

"Birgit, I'm still a virgin," Julie said. "I mean, I haven't done anything at all. I haven't even kissed yet."

"Do you want to?" I asked.

"I don't know," Julie replied.

"Sorry," I said apologetically. "I think I made a mistake."

Julie shook her head, "No, you didn't. Can I think about it?"

"Yes. I won't mention it again and just wait for you to talk to me about it if you want to. No pressure."

"Which guy, if I can ask."

I considered the best thing to do, and I felt I had to tell her, because I couldn't expect her to agree to a threesome without knowing who the guy was.

"Peter Kallas," I replied. "But please keep that secret."

"Obviously! He's good looking! Is he good?"

"I taught him," I giggled. "So what do you think?!"

 Jesse

Viktoria and I got into the shower mid-afternoon to wash up after two hard fucks separated by sixty-nine.

"I was surprised that there wasn't any blood," Viktoria said as I soaped her sexy body.

"If you read the book, you'd know why," I replied.

"Sure, but everyone says it hurts and girls bleed, so I thought maybe the book was wrong."

"People say lots of dumb stuff about sex," I replied. "And most people don't even really understand their own bodies."

"The book said that, and I guess it was right, because I had no idea how good it would feel that day in the park when you rubbed me!"

"That specific piece of information is not included in sex ed!" I chuckled. "And I think you can guess why!"

"I can! And now that I know how good it feels, I'll fuck anytime you want! And seeing how much you liked it, I bet you want to do it again!"

"Perhaps," I replied with a silly smile.

"Seriously, Jesse, you made me feel out of this world and I really want to do it again with you!"

Tall, sexy blondes were absolutely my sweet spot, and CeCe was going away to college. Viktoria couldn't take her place, but I certainly wouldn't mind being with her if she could find a way for us to spend time together.

"I do want to, but getting together will be difficult. It's not like your Dad will let us see each other!"

"I should do what Ariel did in *Footloose*!"

"Telling your dad you aren't a virgin in the nave of the church might not be the best idea."

"No, but I should! Just to let him know that I decide, not him!"

"What happened to being worried about being sent to a monastery?"

"I just wish he'd see me as a young woman, not a little kid."

"Show him you're a mature, responsible person," I said. "That is all you can do."

"But I am! He's afraid I'm going to do what we did today! That's why he tries to control everything I do!"

"Then all you can do is wait him out and make sure you go to college at a school where you have to live in the dorms, not at home."

"Are you going away to school?"

"Probably UW Madison, for business and sports management," I replied. "UW is my first choice, and I have to look into others. What about you?"

"No clue. I'm not even sure what I want to study yet."

I finished soaping her body, and she rinsed off, then took the soap so she could wash me. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feeling of her soft hands lathering my body, and when she finished, I rinsed off. We got out of the shower, dried each other, then went to my bedroom to dress. Once we were dressed, we went out to the car so I could drive her home.



August 9, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

Birgit ran with Suzanne and me on Friday morning, and after showers, Birgit and I cuddled on the chaise until breakfast.

"I'm moving the rest of my things today," Estrella said when she joined us to eat.

"Have you met your roommate?" I asked.

"No. It's a girl from Georgia, and she won't be here for two weeks for her orientation. My orientation has been someone boring because I've lived here for more than six months, while some of the foreign students have never been out of their home countries. One girl from Indonesia had never been off her island or on a plane before she flew to Chicago."

"What are you doing for orientation?" Birgit asked.

"Learning about American culture, seeing Chicago, learning how to get around, and all those things I already know how to do. But they wouldn't let me skip because officially I'm from Argentina. Steve, how did you manage to avoid having to live in the dorms for the first year?"

"Very carefully," I chuckled. "I changed my address to the apartment Elyse and I rented, then simply canceled the dorm because I was an Illinois resident with an Illinois address, Illinois driving license, Illinois plates, and had income attributable to Illinois. That was enough that they didn't press the issue. Kara managed by submitting her application using my address here in Chicago."

"Estrella, have you met your professors?" Kara asked.

"Yes. They were at the dinner that was held last night. I met Doctor Bauer, Doctor Driessen, and Professor Kallas, all of whom had good things to say about Steve and his company."

"Those men will teach you everything you need to know to be successful as a software developer, but you need liberal arts courses to be a well-rounded person and a good employee. Don't neglect those courses. They make up a big part of our hiring decisions."

"What do you recommend?"

"Philosophy, creative writing, world religions, and history."

"I had those in High School in Argentina."

"Then take more advanced courses. The goal is to learn critical thinking."

"Like the course you're offering for the medical school?"

"It's the same idea, yes."

When we finished breakfast, I headed to the office. Just after 9:00am, Kimmy put through a call from Jacob Goldberg.

"The bank has offered to settle all their claims against NIKA for \$40,000," he said.

"So long as that includes NIKA retaining the intellectual property, we'll settle for that amount and a complete release from all claims, with no exceptions. And that is for NIKA, SKJ Partners, and all the principals personally. And I mean airtight, Jacob."

"They'll accept that. They won't get more than that if they try to sell the IP after taking it in the bankruptcy proceedings."

"And finally, after ten years, the entire sordid Lone Star saga comes to a close."

"I'll get the papers drawn up, and we'll arrange for signatures and the approval of the bankruptcy court. At that point, there are no outstanding claims against any of your interests, and no outstanding obligations, so we can ask for the bankruptcy petition to be dismissed."

"Make it so!"

 Jesse

"Were you surprised by any of the cuts?" Nicholas asked as we left the rink just after noon.

"No," I replied. "It pretty much was what I expected. I wasn't sure about the final choices for the third D line and fourth O line, but I think Coach made the right decisions. I'm glad you made the third O line."

"Me, too! And right wing is my preferred position, so it's perfect. Do you think the team is better than last year?"

"It's hard to say because we lost some really good players, but I think we have a solid chance to win the citywide championship. We just have to not have a game like the one last year."

"That totally sucked!" Nicholas declared.

We put our gear in the back of Aunt Kara's SUV, got into our seats, buckled in, and headed for home.

"Tom said it's OK for me to hang out with you and your friends on Friday nights, but I have to be home by 11:00pm because Mom said so."

"We're almost always home before then," I replied. "We have to follow the stupid city curfew, which means if we aren't home, then one of the parents has to be with us."

"What are you doing tonight?"

"We're having pizza then going to see *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams*. Birgit and some of her friends are coming along."

"What about Stephie?"

"No clue. I spoke to Birgit, but she didn't say anything about Stephie or Ashley. Is that a problem?"

"Not for me, but she's not exactly friendly to me."

"Just ignore her," I replied. "She won't make a scene if she's there."

"Is CeCe going to be there?"

"Yes. She leaves for Arizona at the end of next week. Some other girls from the softball team will be at the movie, along with some cheerleaders. Dinner is our smaller group, and not my sister and her friends. Kwame will join us; he leaves for Maine tomorrow. And Mia and Jerry are here until the end of next week."

"Cool!"

 Birgit

Peter joined me for lunch and then we went to the sauna. He'd always worn a bathing suit before, because his parents insisted, but I put up Dad's 'Privacy Please' sign and convinced him it was safe to be naked and nobody would bother us. I put lots of water on the rocks to make a lot of steam, and when it filled the sauna, I stretched out on the bench and put my head in Peter's lap.

"Birgit!" Peter exclaimed as I kissed his dick.

"What?" I asked, faking innocence.

"What if someone comes in?!"

"Nobody will come in with the sign up, but you are going to cum! A lot!"

I didn't give him a chance to respond, taking the head of his dick into my mouth, swirling my tongue and sucking. Peter moaned and didn't resist, and he quickly

got hard. I grasped his shaft with my hand and began stroking slowly as I swirled my tongue and sucked, wanting him to cum so that he could be inside me and last a long time.

Some of the girls thought giving blowjobs was gross, and letting a boy cum in their mouth was disgusting, but I loved having Peter's dick in my mouth, how it felt when he shot off, and the taste of his cum. That happened five minutes later when Peter's dick pulsed, he groaned, and jets of his cum spurted into my mouth. I swallowed, licked him clean, then sat up so we could exchange a deep French kiss.

"Your turn," I said when I broke the kiss.

I leaned back and spread my legs wide, exposing my pussy for Peter, who moved between my legs. I moaned softly when Peter pushed his tongue into me and began pleasuring me the way I'd taught him. Peter's tongue teased my clit, and I was so excited from having given him a blowjob that I shuddered and groaned, and my pussy juices drenched his face. Three minutes later, it happened again, and I felt Peter move his face from my pussy.

I opened my eyes and watched intently as he rose up, put the head of his dick against my slick pussy lips, pushed forward, and slowly disappeared into me, filling me full. I slid my hand over my pubic hair and gently massaged my clit while Peter fucked me. I came three times before Peter groaned and hot cum spurted into my spasming pussy.

We couldn't stay in the sauna too much longer at the high temperature, so after Peter pulled out, I turned off the heating unit and filled the whirlpool with warm water. Peter got into the tub and I sat between his legs and leaned back, taking his hands and moving one to my boob and the other to my pussy.

"Make me cum," I requested.

I felt Peter's finger slip into my pussy while his other hand rubbed my nipple.

"Yes," I breathed. "Just like that."

A few minutes later, I groaned and shuddered, then gasped, "Keep going!"

He did and gave me two more orgasms before he wrapped his arms around me and we enjoyed the warm water.

"Peter, if there was another girl who wanted to be with us, are you OK with it?"

"You mean, like be in the sauna, or..."

"Or!" I giggled. "A threesome where we all had sex together."

"Uhm, er, uhm, I'm not sure."

"Think about it," I said sexily. "Two girls sucking you, then you get to fuck both of them, and you can watch them do stuff, too!"

"Do stuff?!" Peter asked skeptically.

"Girls have sex together! You know what from Mom One and Mom Two!"

"But you aren't like them!"

"I already had sex with a girl," I replied. "It was interesting, and I would do it again in a threesome!"

"You had sex with a girl?!" Peter gasped.

"So?" I asked. "Does that change how it feels when I suck you and swallow your cum?"

"Er, no."

"Or how it feels when you have your big dick inside my tight pussy?"

"No."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I, uhm, er, thought you were straight."

"I am! But I experimented with a girl to see what it was like. It wasn't gross, and now when I have a threesome, I know I'll be OK with doing stuff."

"I'm not sure."

"Think about it," I said.

"Who?"

"Nobody in particular at the moment," I said.

That wasn't quite true, because Julie might decide she was interested, but she hadn't agreed and I wasn't going to reveal anything. If it wasn't her, I was sure I could find another girl who I liked and who would be interested. But that wasn't the only thing I thought about! I wondered what it would be like to have two guys at once, though if I suggested that to Peter he might actually have a stroke given his reaction to the idea of being with two girls.

A short time later, we got out of the whirlpool, put on robes, and went up to my room so we could shower and dress.

 Matthew

"My brother and his friends are going to see the new *Spy Kids* movie tonight," I said to Chelsea after disconnecting the call from Jesse. "Want to go?"

"Sure!"

"They're going to Giordano's in Hyde Park for pizza beforehand, so I thought we'd just go to my dad's house now."

"Mirrors?" Chelsea asked invitingly.

I laughed, "You really like them!"

"I love watching you make love to me!"

"I'm definitely going to speak to Eduardo about mirrors in one of the bedrooms in the townhouse when we see him Sunday for the family dinner at my dad's house."

"I thought you'd done that!"

"No, I just thought about it. Over the summer we've been able to go to my dad's house and use the room off the kitchen, but Dad's Japanese friend will be back in another week, and she'll use it pretty often."

"Your dad doesn't bother you at all, does he?"

"Why should he? It's consensual and they all agree that it's OK. It's really none of my business. He and his wives and girlfriends are all happy. I have you and I'm happy. And you know my dad and mom don't object, even though we started sleeping together when I was fourteen. All of us just mind our own business, basically. If everyone did that, the world would be a much better place!"

"Do you think Mark and Maggie could join us?"

"We can call, but they'd need to get into the city and their parents all work, so they'd have to take the train and they'd need to find a ride to the station as well. Then they have to get home."

"It would be so much easier if they could just spend the night!"

"Try that idea on Maggie's parents!" I said, shaking my head. "Even though we know Mark and Maggie aren't having sex, her parents would lose their minds if she even asked to stay at the townhouse with us."

"You think they'll wait until they marry?"

"I think it's none of my business except insofar as Maggie made it clear they aren't doing that now. What happens in the future is up to them. Like many other questions about relationships, it's better if we just mind our own business and let other people mind their own business. You know what would happen if someone took an interest in our relationship."

"True."

"So let it be, please. Let's head to the L so we can get to my dad's house."

"And make love under the mirrors!"

"Yes, Dear," I deadpanned.

Chelsea smacked my arm, we got up from the couch, and got ready to leave.

 Steve

"Remember, I'm heading to Mayo on Monday morning," I said to my wives as we relaxed in the 'Indian' room after dinner.

"Commercial flight or Air Spurgeon?" Jessica asked.

"Commercial," I replied. "I don't have anything pressing enough to warrant the cost of the flights."

"She'd comp you," Kara said.

"She would, but I won't do that," I replied. "That's taking advantage, and it costs her real money."

Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne all laughed.

"That's like you spending \$5.00 on a cup of coffee at Starbucks!" Suzanne declared.

"OK, but to paraphrase Everett Dirksen, ten thousand here, ten thousand there, pretty soon, you're talking real money. We're very well off, but we still have to live within our means. So does Samantha, even if those means are a couple orders of magnitude above ours. She hasn't grown her dad's investment by being profligate or spending like a drunken sailor!"

"We know quite a few sailors who drink," Kara declared. "And they don't spend money like drunken sailors!"

"Officers are a different breed," I chuckled. "Slight more refined than the swabbies, but still sailors at their core."

"Albert?" Jessica asked.

"Fighter pilot wannabe," I replied. "They could give doctors lessons in egomaniacal behavior! And they have to be squared away, at least in public."

"Including hanging all his shirts in color order, identically spaced in his closet?"

"They also tend to have OCD!" I declared. "Everything has a checklist. And you follow it or people die. Sound familiar, Miss Trauma Surgeon?"

"Says the man whose company has a two-page document covering just variable names in programs!" Jessica replied, rolling her eyes.

"I never said I wasn't!" I countered. "Just that you have no room to talk about our junior Top Gun! And speaking of him, Aimee will be here for Labor Day and she and Albert are flying to Cincinnati on Saturday and will return on Monday morning. Aimee will head back East because she has meetings on Tuesday."

"Steve, what do you think about Birgit and Peter?" Kara asked.

"I think Peter is a lucky, lucky boy," I chuckled. "Other than that, it's between them. Dave came to speak to me, and I said basically the same thing. Julia is more mellow, as you'd expect."

"I was more concerned about him being sensitive and perhaps mistaking Birgit's affections for something other than pure hormones!"

"We have to leave that to the kids to work out," I replied. "We can't interfere unless we see something completely out of line. You certainly didn't appreciate your dad interposing himself in our relationship! Or my mom!"

"I wasn't thinking about interfering, only having a word with Birgit."

"I don't think that's wise, Kara," Suzanne said. "You might restart the Cold War. If anyone is going to discuss it with Birgit, it almost has to be Katy. Even Steve might be the object of Birgit's wrath if he said something she felt was interference."

"I think Suzanne is right," I interjected. "If things turn out badly, *then* we can say something to Birgit about it, but not before. I'd wager she made it clear that he has to follow her rules if he wants to see paradise by the sauna light!"

Jessica laughed, "Nice riff on Meat Loaf! But that song ends badly for the lovers."

"Only because the girl demanded to know if he would 'love her forever' before she'd agree to have sex!" I replied. "And like most teenage boys, he wanted it so badly he said he would, and, to quote my dad 'marry in haste; repent at leisure'."

"You blame the girl?!" Jessica asked.

"It takes two to tango, but she was 'barely seventeen and barely dressed' and they'd been at the point of no return when she asked him. He's there with a raging erection, and she asks if he loves her. What is the average horny teenage boy going to do at that point?"

"Say 'I love you' and bang her like a drum!" Kara tittered. "For about twenty seconds!"

"The first time," I chuckled. "And teenage boys have short refractory periods!"

"Yours isn't too bad," Kara teased.

"The fifteen minute wait is worth it!" Suzanne declared. "Once he's hard, he's like those dumb Viagra commercials 'if you have an erection lasting more than four hours...!'"

"Marketing!" Jessica said with a soft laugh. "Take this and you can have erections that last four hours! Of course, the treatment for the medical condition of one that won't go down is aspiration of blood with a needle!"

"Pass," I said flatly, causing all three women to laugh.

"Would you take ED drugs?" Suzanne asked.

"I think Jess can answer that better than I can."

"With his low blood pressure, near syncope, and other hormonal issues, I'd recommend against it. Not that he needs it!"

"I was just asking theoretically," Suzanne said. "Which I'm sure you knew."

"I vote we test Steve's ability to get long-lasting erections!" Kara declared.

"Second!" Suzanne exclaimed.

"I'll vote 'yes'," Jessica replied.

"Then let's go to bed!" I declared.



August 10, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Do you still plan to compete at the Labor Day tournament?" Sensei Will asked me when I arrived at the dojo on Saturday morning.

"Yes. Dad spoke to Sensei Ichirou, and if there are any challenges in my matches, they'll go to Sensei Ichirou instead of Dad."

"Will you make the special practice sessions the next two Sunday afternoons?"

"Yes."

"Good. Take your place."

"Yes, Sensei!"

I lined up as the most senior brown belt, which meant I was just to the right of the most junior black belt, a boy named Kevin Campbell, who was seventeen and cute. He had joined the dojo at the end of May after his family had moved to Chicago from Utah and had earned his black belt in Salt Lake City. I hadn't really had a chance to speak to him because we had been gone, but I wanted to get to know him. He looked over at me, and I gave him my sweetest smile. He smiled back, and I immediately knew he was interested!

He wasn't assigned to work with my group, but when class ended, I hurried over to catch him before he went into the locker room to change.

"Hi!" I exclaimed. "I'm Birgit Adams!"

He smiled, "I know! You're Sensei Steve's daughter."

"Would you like to hang out sometime?" I asked.

"You're pretty young," he replied.

"I'll be a Freshman!" I said.

"And I'll be a Senior. What are you, fourteen?"

"Yes, but so what?"

"My parents would flip if I started hanging out with Freshman girl."

I rolled my eyes, "Give me a break!"

"It's true. I need to change. I'll see you next class."

He turned and went into the locker room and I glared at him, then went to the lobby to meet Dad, Mom, Suzanne, and my sisters so we could walk home.

"What's bothering you, Pumpkin?" Dad asked as we walked out onto the sidewalk. "You're glowering."

"I asked Kevin Campbell if he wanted to hang out, and he said I was too young! I'll be a Freshman and he'll be a Senior, so it's only three years! And he said his parents would freak out if he hung out with a Freshman girl! I mean, seriously, what is up with that?!"

"You're going to run into a lot of people who feel that way," Dad said. "And, sadly, even showing that you're mature won't help in some cases, maybe even most."

"Why are people so dumb?!" I groused. "I'm not a baby! I'm a woman!"

"A young woman," Dad countered.

"Fine," I growled. "But he's only three years older!"

"Yes, but all he sees is you being fourteen and a Freshman," Dad replied. "And there's nothing you can do to change that."

"Argh!" I growled.

Kjell's friends, even the ones who were seventeen or eighteen, didn't think I was a little girl and they didn't treat me as if I were fourteen! And Mikael certainly hadn't treated me like a little girl! I was afraid I wouldn't be able to find an older boy before I went to Sweden as an exchange student. Uncle Pete or Uncle Kurt would be perfect, but neither Aunt Melanie nor Aunt Kathy would give them permission. It just wasn't right!

 Steve

"Are you less annoyed?" I asked Birgit as we walked back to the dojo after lunch for the first meeting with my personal students since before our trip.

"It's just dumb, Dad!" she protested.

"Dumb it may be, but you still have to respect what other people think, even if you disagree."

"Do you think I'm too young?"

"That's not a simple question to answer, because it all depends on how you mean it, but also on how others perceive you. And that doesn't depend on your self-image, or even what I think in that regard."

Birgit giggled, "Something my moms would never allow!"

"That's not what I meant, young lady!"

"Oh, please! If I weren't your daughter, what would you have done?"

"I don't play 'What if?' games, and you know it!" I protested.

"Humor me!"

I laughed, "I'm going to kill Penelope!"

"So?"

"If a young woman like you had approached me in the past, I would certainly have considered it. But now, things have changed."

"You mean because girls think you're too old?"

"Many do," I replied. "But it's also the case that girls under seventeen aren't nearly as mature as they were even five years ago."

"American society is so messed up," Birgit declared. "People in Sweden are way better."

"In Europe in general," I replied. "Japan, too."

"Speaking of Japan, When is Yuriko-chan coming back?"

"Next Friday. Suzanne is picking her up from the airport."

"What are we discussing today?"

"The proper mentality for competition."

"*Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius!*" Birgit declared.

I laughed, "Which of my classical works did you get that from?"

"The Latin quote book. It sounds cooler than 'Kill them all! God will know his own!'"

"That might not be the best attitude."

"OK, how about -- *To crush your enemies -- see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentation of their women!*"

I laughed again, "I'm not sure *Conan the Barbarian* is a proper source of wisdom."

"Iñigo Montoya?" Birgit asked.

"Except he was acting out of revenge, and at the end of the movie he says something important -- '*Is very strange. I have been in the revenge business so long, now that it is over, I do not know what to do with the rest of my life*'. He was so focused on revenge that he hadn't thought about what to do afterwards. Now, be serious."

"Strive to win, but honor, respect, and dignity are more important than victory."

"Very good, Pumpkin."

"I do listen to you, Dad!"

"When it suits you," I chuckled.

 Jesse

"I'm really going to miss you," CeCe said as we lay in bed together on Saturday afternoon.

"I'll miss you, too," I agreed.

"I plan to come home at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I hope I can see you."

"I'll be here, and I have no plans to be steady with anyone. I suspect you'll meet guys at college who are interested in a tall, athletic blonde!"

"Yes, but I have you fully trained!" CeCe teased.

I laughed, "Who trained whom?"

"I was teasing, of course! How does the hockey team look?"

"Pretty good, I think. We'll really miss Kwame, Lee, and Tim, but a couple of the new guys look really good, including Nicholas. We'll be good, but winning the tournament takes more than just being good. You know what happened last year."

"At least you guys made it. The softball team didn't make the playoffs any of the four years I was on the team!"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" I called out.

"Cover up!" Mom One called back.

I laughed and pulled the comforter up to the middle of our stomachs.

"OK," I said loud enough for Mom One to hear.

The door opened and Mom One stepped in.

"Angelina is here with four other girls she said are new cheerleaders."

"It's up to you, CeCe," I said. "We agreed to spend the day together."

"I'd rather you stayed with me," she said.

"Mom One, tell Angelina I'm busy and I'll call her after church tomorrow."

"OK," Mom One said.

She closed the door and CeCe snuggled close.

"Thanks," she said.

 Steve

"Do you have a moment?" Rachel Kealty asked when the session at the dojo ended.

"Sure," I replied, then turned to Birgit, "You can walk home, Pumpkin. Let your mom know I'm meeting with Rachel, please."

"OK," Birgit agreed.

Rachel and I went into Sensei Will's office and I shut the door.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"First, thank you for telling me about the position with McCarthy/Jenkins. I start on Monday."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks," she said. "I wanted to talk to you about Doctor Ken Allison."

"A cardiothoracic surgeon, I've met twice at hospital events," I replied, "and a friend of Jessica's. What about him?"

"Jessica arranged for us to have coffee on Wednesday evening. Any advice?"

"Be your sweet, personable self," I said with a smile. "You've been freed from the trap which had ensnared you, and now it's time to live. You have all the skills you need to create a successful relationship."

Rachel smirked, "The blowjob was that good?"

I laughed, "It was, but that wasn't what I meant and you know it! I would advise waiting for that, unless you're just looking to get laid and not start a relationship."

"If I wanted that, I'd come to you!" Rachel declared. "Though I guess that's not quite true, because we have a relationship."

"We do, and remember, that came first, before what was bonding to me and baptism to you. Have coffee, talk, and if you like him, then arrange to have coffee a second time before you go on a regular date."

"He's five years younger than I am."

"So?" I asked. "If I recall correctly, he's divorced."

"Yes, with two kids who are the same ages as Albert and Ashley. They live with their mom, according to Jessica."

"Don't worry about the age difference," I replied. "You look at least ten years younger than you are. Does he know how old you are?"

"Jessica told him, but only after she showed him my picture."

"Given you're more beautiful in person than any photo could represent, he's going to be very happy."

"Flatterer!"

"I'm just calling it as I see it, and I've seen it all!"

"Yes, you have!"

"I'm happy for you," I said.

"Thanks."

X. Dangerous

August 11, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

I went to church at Holy Virgin Protection Cathedral and decided against going to Sunday School so that I could get home by 1:00pm. I ate lunch, then called Angelina.

"Sorry about yesterday," I replied. "But CeCe was visiting."

Angelina laughed, "And you aren't going to pass up your last chances with her! It was my own fault for not calling first. What are you doing this afternoon?"

"I didn't have any plans."

"I could come over, if that's OK."

"Sure."

"See you in ten minutes!"

We said 'goodbye' and hung up, and true to her word, Angelina arrived ten minutes later, and we went up to my room.

"The new cheerleaders are free tomorrow and want to check out the sauna," Angelina said as we cuddled together after fooling around for an hour.

"That should be OK," I replied. "After lunch?"

"Sure. How about if we show up around 1:00pm?"

"That sounds good."

"When will the group start going out on Fridays?"

"Once school starts, so after Labor Day. Your dad will be cool with you hanging out with us?"

"Mom made it clear that once I had my «quince» he had to stop treating me like a little kid! So yes, I can, and my curfew is 11:00pm."

"That works because the city curfew is 10:00pm. We're rarely out after that, but if we are, then we make arrangements with parents to get us."

"So dumb!" Angelina declared.

"Oh, I know," I replied. "But we can't even vote to change it, and too many people are afraid teens might actually grow up that they won't allow us the freedom we need."

"You should run for office!"

"Oh, hell no!" I exclaimed. "Not happening. You could not pay me enough to do that, and besides, people don't vote for candidates who tell the truth and who insist government should interfere less and fewer things should be illegal. Telling people to mind their own fucking business is not a successful campaign strategy."

"Your dad would vote for that!"

I laughed, "As a concept, but for me? He wouldn't vote for me anymore than I'd vote for him! Birgit, on the other hand, would be happy to have him be Supreme Ruler of the Universe, so long as he listened to her advice!"

"In other words, *she* wants to be Supreme Ruler of the Universe, and would be OK if your dad were her proxy."

"Exactly."

I heard the phone ring and wasn't surprised when a minute later, Mom Two knocked on the door and let me know Viktoria wanted to speak to me. I asked Mom Two to take a message and let Viktoria know I'd call her back.

"The girl from your old church?" Angelina asked.

"Yes. I'm sure she wants to see me, but she has to sneak to do it."

"Kind of like me until my «quince», well, and now about this. Dad would *not* approve!"

"Most dads wouldn't."

"But your dad won't have a problem with Birgit having a boyfriend, right?"

"No, he won't. But he's not most dads!"

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

I laughed, "I think Birgit will have 'boy toys', not boyfriends, until after she graduates from college. She's more like me, and opposite Matthew and Stephanie."

"No girlfriend until after college?"

"I said 'more like' not 'identical'," I countered. "But I'm not interested in a steady girlfriend during High School."

"So, you're going back to a different girl every day?"

"I didn't say that, either. But I want my freedom. You should, too! You're only fifteen and I'm only sixteen. Let's just have fun and not worry too much about what's going to happen in ten years! Want to go again?"

"Yes!" Angelina exclaimed happily.

 Michael

The game between the Mariners and White Sox didn't start out well, with the Mariners scoring in the first inning on a walk and two singles after two men were out, but the Sox came back in the bottom of the second with five runs on five straight hits -- a pair of singles, a double, and two home runs. They got a sixth hit, a single, but that runner was stranded when the Mariners got three consecutive outs.

"I was worried when the Sox gave up a run in the first inning," Andi said when the third inning began. "But now I'm sure they'll win up 5-1!"

"I wouldn't bet on that just yet," I said as John Olerud hit a two-run homer for Seattle to make the score 5-3.

"Ugh!" Andi grouched. "The Sox pitching stinks!"

The Sox got one back in the bottom of the inning on a Jose Valentin home run, making it 6-3.

"Did you hear about the new computer club that's starting at school?" Andi asked.

"I had a call from Mr. Walthers asking if I would join," I said. "He called everyone in robotics and math club. I'm going to join."

"Me, too!" Andi declared, grabbing my arm.

The game settled down somewhat, though the Mariners scored a run in the seventh and a run in the ninth, but with two outs, the Sox put it away with pop fly caught by second-baseman Willie Harris, to end the game 6-5 without the Sox having to bat in the bottom of the ninth.

"This was fun!" Andi exclaimed as we left the stadium with her dad and Eduardo to have dinner in Greek Town.

 Birgit

"Are you going to live in the dorms or here in the Condo?" I asked Rachel.

"The dorms!" she replied. "As much as I like living here, two toddlers full-time is a bit much. I mean, sure, they have their nanny during the day, but I have almost no privacy. Not that I'd want to go home, but if I could have lived at your house like I wanted, that would have been perfect."

"Why do you care what your mom thinks?" Tiffany asked.

"Because she could cause trouble for my dad," I quickly replied. "Even if Rachel is eighteen, her mom could claim they had sex before Rachel turned seventeen, and even if Dad and Rachel both deny it, it could still cause problems. According to Patricia, they could actually convict my dad just on Rachel's mom's word, even if Rachel denied it."

"What the fuck?!" Tiffany exclaimed. "How is that even possible?"

"Because the government has declared war on sex," Rachel replied. "Especially on teen sex. Which is why Suzanne talked to you about not saying anything about what you want to anyone, and reminding you that you have to keep it secret."

"Ugh!" Tiffany exclaimed. "I want it NOW!"

"Then you need to find someone your age or a year older," Rachel replied.

"No thanks! I'll just have to wait a year."

"You shouldn't even talk to us about it," Rachel said. "Sure, it's safe here, but if you slip up, you won't get the best, most intense, most over-the-top, most expert deflowering experience you could ever have!"

Which was what I had wanted, I thought. And I missed it because I was too obvious about it. If nobody had known, and I had gone to dad privately, he might have. But once my moms knew, there was no way they'd ever allow it. I'd do it with him now, but it wouldn't be the same. I still needed to find an older guy, maybe one in college, who wouldn't freak out about me being a Freshman like Kevin had.

"Some guys won't even consider it if you're close in age," I grouched. "There was a guy I asked to hang out with who's going to be a Senior, and he said 'no' because I'm fourteen. Like I'm a little girl or something!"

"At least you don't get that treatment at home," Rachel said. "I sure did, and Tiffany does."

"My mom chilled out a bit over the summer," Tiffany said. "In fact, a lot."

I almost giggled because I was positive the reason Tiffany's mom had chilled out was that dad had fucked her senseless!

"What are we doing for the rest of the afternoon?" I asked.

"What about Thai food?" Rachel suggested. "We could go to Star of Siam, then come back here to watch a movie before your dad picks you up."

"What movies do you have?" Tiffany asked.

"Just about anything you can think of that isn't porn!" Rachel declared.

"I want to see *Eyes Wide Shut*," Tiffany said. "Do you have it?"

"Yes. OK with you, Birgit?"

"Sure! Thai food and a movie with lots of sex! I'm in!"

My friends laughed as we got up from the couch so we could head to the restaurant.

 Jesse

I called Viktoria late in the afternoon, hoping that her dad wouldn't answer the phone. I was happy when Viktoria answered.

"Hi, Jesse!" she exclaimed after I greeted her. "Can I see you this week?"

"I have hockey practice every morning," I replied. "We don't finish until 11:00am, and then I have to take Nicholas home."

"If I took the train, could I watch your practice?"

"I don't see why not," I replied. "It's open to anyone."

"And could you bring me home by 5:00pm?"

"We'd only have about two hours together by the time we had lunch and with the time it would take to drive you to Glen Ellyn."

"That's long enough for what I want!" she exclaimed.

"How about Tuesday?" I asked. "Will that work?"

"Yes! Tell me how to get to the ice rink, please!"

I explained how she could get there via Metra and the CTA, she said she'd arrive by 10:30am, and then we said 'goodbye'.



August 12, 2002, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota

 Steve

"I want you to speak to a neurologist who is doing research on post-concussion syndrome," Mary said when she and her medical student, Jianyu, finished my primary exam late on Monday morning.

"I set aside two days for you to poke and prod me!" I chuckled.

"This afternoon you'll meet with Doctor Kirilenko, the neurologist, and have your MRI EEG. Tomorrow morning, we'll do your fasting blood panel, as well as a glucose tolerance test. Then you'll have a nuclear cardiac stress test, a cardiac ultrasound, and in the afternoon, a full-body electron beam CT scan and meet with Doctor Brown. You'll want to consult with me before you have any x-rays, including dental, in the near future, except in an emergency."

"I'll let my dentist know; I assume you'll send Doctor Kulczycki a complete set of results?"

"Yes. I'll make sure the x-rays are flagged."

"Sounds good."

"Shall we have lunch? Doctor Ross and Doctor Alston will join us, as will Naomi. I assume it's OK for Jianyu to join us."

"Yes, of course," I agreed.

"Don and I are expecting you to join us for dinner. I invited Alejandra and Trent, and Naomi and Greg will join us as well."

"I'm looking forward to it, and I'm glad you invited them."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"Jesse, please meet Ebele, Ime, Estefana, and Robin," Angelina said, "our new Freshmen members of the cheer squad. Girls, this is Jesse, the captain of the hockey team."

I had just finished eating lunch after coming home from hockey practice.

"Hi!" I said to the four girls.

Ebele had very dark skin and was tall and athletic. Ime, who was a bit shorter than Ebele, had lighter skin and was curvier. Estefana was the shortest of the four and the prettiest, with beautiful brown eyes and long brown hair. Robin was a few inches shorter than me, had strawberry blonde hair in a French braid, and was the thinnest of the four.

"Hi!" all four girls exclaimed together.

"The girls want to check out the sauna," Angelina said. "Can we?"

"Sure. Let's go to the main house."

"I heard there's an elevator," Robin said.

"There is. In fact, why don't I give you a tour of my house and the main house?"

They agreed, so I showed them the coach house first, including the Duck's Nest in the basement.

"This is really just yours?" Estefana asked.

"Except for doing laundry, nobody else comes down here," I said. "And my moms completely honor my privacy."

"That's cool!" Ime declared. "My dad and mom are like prison guards at home! I can't have the door to my room closed except when I'm changing or sleeping, they monitor my computer, and nobody is even allowed upstairs except for our family."

After finishing the tour of the guest house, we went to the main house.

"Why do you live in the smaller house?" Ebele asked.

"Because I live with my moms, and they want to have their own family, separate from my dad. It's cool because my dad is right next door, but my moms make all their own decisions."

"I've seen your moms at hockey games," Robin said. "Which one is your real mom?"

"Both!" I declared firmly. "Mom One gave birth to me, but they've been a couple from before I was born."

And, I didn't add, they had both been with Dad when I was conceived.

"Sorry," Robin replied. "That's what I meant, and it came out wrong."

We rode the elevator up to the attic room, though we had to do it in two groups because three in the elevator was the absolute maximum, and two was normal. The tour worked its way down to the basement.

"Nobody is home?" Robin asked.

"My dad and aunts are at work, my sisters are out with their friends, and my brother is doing a community service project with his Scout troop. I'm not sure where Natalie and Suzanne are."

"Who are they?"

"Part of the family," I replied. "Not blood relatives, but they live here and are treated like part of the family."

Angelina knew more, but in keeping with the family policy of being circumspect, I was being careful about what I said.

"I also have two brothers who live in the suburbs," I continued.

"Your dad has kids with three women?" Estefana asked.

"By four," I replied. "Mom One for me; Aunt Kara for my sisters Birgit and Stephie; Aunt Jessica for my brother Albert and sister Ashley; and my Aunt Elyse for my brothers Matthew and Michael."

"Divorced and remarried so many times?" she asked.

"No. He's married to my Aunt Jessica, and that's his only legal marriage. His relationship with the other moms varies, but it's really none of my business."

"Strange," Ime observed.

"It's different, for sure, but we all get along great."

"And you really use the sauna naked?" Robin asked. "With mixed sexes?"

"Yes," I replied. "If anyone is uncomfortable with that, then everyone wears a bathing suit or wraps a towel around themselves."

"Hang on!" Ime protested. "You've been in the sauna naked with your sisters, moms, and aunts?"

"Yes. Nudity does not imply sex, no matter what society says."

"There is no way I'd let my brother see me naked!" Estefana declared. "Just no way!"

I shrugged, "It's no big deal, but that's why we have the rule that says if anyone is uncomfortable, everyone has to cover up. If you don't have bathing suits on under your shorts and t-shirts, then you can wrap towels around yourselves. We have huge towels that make it easy to do that. They're in the closet here, along with robes. You can change in the guest rooms. So, which is it?"

"Towels," Robin said firmly.

"Then that's what we'll do," I said.

About ten minutes later, after the rocks had heated, the six of us were sitting in the sauna with towels wrapped around us.

"I heard the entire softball team was in here and they were all suspended because of it," Estefana said.

"Some parents freaked out," I replied. "And technically, I'm not supposed to let anyone be naked in the sauna without their parents' permission."

I hadn't been worried about the cheerleaders because I had been almost positive that four Freshman girls wouldn't just get naked in front of me, and that had proved to be true. Had they said they wanted to use it naked, I'd have raised the concern about parental consent for anyone under seventeen. I was still safe, generally speaking, until I turned eighteen, but there was always a risk of some overzealous prosecutor going after me or my dad.

"Oh, right, like my parents would be OK with even THIS!" Robin grouched.

"Mine sure wouldn't!" Ime said. "My dad will only let me see female doctors."

"You realize how dumb that is, right?" I asked.

"I didn't say it was smart!" she protested. "Just saying how he thinks."

"You don't know the half of it," Ebele protested. "My grandmother wanted me to be cut the way women are back in Nigeria!"

"No way!" I protested. "Genital mutilation?"

"Called 'cutting'," she said. "My mom refused, and it caused a huge row between my mom and my grandmother, my dad's mom."

"That's crazy!" Robin protested. "People still do that?"

"In Nigeria, maybe half of all women have it done, usually sometime before they turn ten. Mom wouldn't even let grandma use a needle to stick me as a symbol."

"Why would anyone do that?" Estefana asked.

"Tradition and mistaken understanding of female anatomy," Ebele said. "And cultural beliefs that women who have not had it done are impure and unmarriageable."

"Do they really remove parts?" Robin asked.

"They really do," Ebele said. "My grandmother, that is my dad's mom, had her clitoris and part of her labia removed. My mom, though, only had a pin prick just as her mother had. Jesse, are you circumcised?"

"No. And none of my brothers are. Why would anyone cut off part of their dick? I mean, if some god told me to do that, I'd have told him exactly where he could

go and what he could do! I agree with you that NOBODY should have part of their body removed, except if it's medically necessary. Well, plastic surgery would be OK, too, even if it were just cosmetic."

"What about a sex-change operation?" Ebele asked.

"I suppose an adult could make that determination for themselves," I replied. "But with circumcision or female genital mutilation, it's parents deciding for infants, or young girls, I guess. That's just wrong."

"There was a situation about eight years ago when a woman from Nigeria avoided deportation from the US because she was afraid her daughters, who were American citizens, would be forced to undergo cutting," Ebele said. "My grandmother was angry; my mom was very happy. My grandmother was outraged when it was made completely illegal in the US in 1996."

"Well, you can be sure of one thing," I said. "Nobody is getting anywhere near that part of my body with a knife!"

The girls all laughed, and the conversation shifted to other topics.

[Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota]

 Steve

After a nice lunch, I had my MRI EEG, supervised by Doctor Virgil Kirilenko, a recent émigré from Russia.

"I wanted to discuss post-concussion syndrome," Doctor Kirilenko said in a heavy Russian accent. "Would you describe concussions, please?"

"The first one was in July 1984. I was in a stationary car which was hit from behind. I'd managed to stop to avoid an accident in front of me, but the driver

following me didn't stop. They diagnosed me with whiplash and a mild concussion. I refrained from strenuous activity, which at that time included martial arts and skydiving.

"The second one was in November 1993. It was the result of a syncopal episode where I hit my head on a table and then the floor, resulting in a linear skull fracture of the left parietal bone, with no depression, no displacement. It was following that incident that I had post-concussion syndrome."

"What were the symptoms experienced?"

"Fatigue, mainly, and some difficulty concentrating. I was required to rest and not exert myself physically or mentally. It took about a month before I had no symptoms, with increasing exercise and cognitive activity. I was told never to skydive, and told not to spar at my karate dojo."

"Have you had any symptoms of any kind since?"

"No."

"You have been exerting yourself?"

"Running most mornings, and by that I mean usually six days a week, and karate at least three times a week, though I've been prohibited from sparring because of the pair of concussions. I have violated that instruction on three occasions, one of which was avoidable but carried literally zero risk."

"How so?"

"A student who thought they were far better than they actually were and whom I embarrassed."

"And other two?"

"Call it hazing," I replied. "I spent five weeks in Japan at the compound of the Master of our school and three of his senior students took exception to a *gaijin* being there. They seriously regretted it."

"But you have engaged in what boxers would call 'bag work'?"

"Yes, using hands, forearms, elbows, feet, shins, and knees."

"And no headaches or other symptoms?"

"None."

"Research in area is developing, but I'd say if your EEG and CT scans are negative, I see no reason to avoid sparring."

"Are you telling me I've missed out on nine years of sparring for no reason?" I asked.

Doctor Kirilenko smiled, "No, is not so. Best information was for you to avoid risk of blow to head. New research shows is usually related to misaligned cervical vertebrae. If you not have, then no problem to spar."

"«Я люблю тебя, Доктор!»" I declared. ("I love you, Doctor!")

"«Ты говоришь по-русски?»" he asked, surprised. ("You speak Russian?")

"No," I replied. "I dated a Russian girl while I was in college, and I know a few dozen phrases."

"Have you been to Russia?"

"Several times, to Moscow and to Saint Petersburg, both before 1991 and after. In fact, we were just in Saint Petersburg last month. Where are you from?"

"I was born in Yekaterinburg, but studied in Saint Petersburg. I met American doctor while working for «Médecins Sans Frontières» in Africa. We marry and I move to US."

"My wife did a tour with «Médecins Sans Frontières» as a medical student," I replied. "She was in Ethiopia."

"I was in Sudan," he replied. "Your wife is doctor in Chicago?"

"She's an Attending trauma surgeon at the University of Chicago hospital."

"Is good to know! I will have result by end of week, and give them to Doctor Whittaker. Once scans are clear, is OK for you to spar."

"Will you put that in writing? I'll need it for the «shihan» of my dojo, as well as my wife and father-in-law, who is also a doctor."

"I will discuss with Doctor Whittaker and provide letter."

"Thank you very much!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"I thought about what you asked," Julie said as we walked home together after having a picnic with the Girl Gang in Washington Park.

Just her saying that made my stomach tighten with anticipation and desire.

"And?" I prompted, hoping she was interested.

"I think I want to, but Birgit, I've never done anything at all! Not even kiss. I'm afraid I'd be bad at it or not know what to do."

"We could teach you," I offered, with that thought causing me to become wet.

"How does it work with three people?" Julie asked.

"Well, I haven't done it, but we'd have sex together, including using our mouths on each other. It would really be up to you what you wanted to do."

"Could I watch you and Peter do it?"

"If I can watch you two! And I'm pretty sure we can figure out stuff for all three of us to do together. Have you had an STI test?"

"No, but I can get one, obviously."

"And you really want to be on the Pill, otherwise we'd have to use rubbers and be super careful."

"I'm not on the Pill, obviously."

"When does your period start?"

"Next week."

"Then you def need to go to the clinic this week, and then we can have fun in about a month, after you have your first period after starting the Pill."

"Would you go with me tomorrow?"

"Sure!" I exclaimed, excited it was going to happen, but unhappy it wasn't going to happen for five weeks.

 Jesse

"What do you think?" Angelina asked as we sat in the whirlpool after the other girls had left.

"About?"

"The girls, of course!" Angelina said with a giggle.

"They all seem cool and not stuck-up," I replied.

"And if they wanted you to initiate them?"

"Remember what I said about that," I replied. "The whole V-card debacle is not something I want to experience again! Nor the stupid parental reaction to the sauna where nothing happened. And remember what I said about consent, too. And peer pressure."

"It sounds like you don't want to."

"I'm just concerned that they do it willingly, not because they feel they have to. And you know the rule about STI tests and birth control. And I have to ask, but do you really want to bring girls to me for sex?"

"You already said you won't be a couple with anyone, and I know you're going to see other girls. Why not have you be the one to initiate the new cheerleaders?"

"Did you tell them it was mandatory?" I asked.

"I didn't. I can't be sure what any of the other girls said."

"If they ask, I'll consider it, but don't be surprised if I say 'no'."

[Rochester, Minnesota]

 Steve

"Steve, this is Sonya Boone, a pediatric nurse," Mary said with a sly smile.

"Sonya, Steve Adams, entrepreneur, karate instructor, and permanent adolescent!"

"So he's a normal guy, then?" Sonya, a pretty strawberry blonde, teased. "Nice to meet you."

"And you," I replied.

I was about to give Mary a look when I saw Naomi smirk, then wink, indicating she was the one who set this up. Alejandra rolled her eyes, but smiled.

"I invited Sonya because an odd number of people isn't as much fun!" Naomi declared.

"Steve is odd enough for two people," Don said with a grin as we shook hands.

"Ain't that the truth!" I grinned. "How are you, Don?"

"Good! We enjoyed seeing Jesse in June. He let Mary know he'll be back next summer."

"That's his plan," I replied. "Thanks for taking care of him."

"You're welcome."

"Steve," Naomi said, "this is Greg, I think you'll remember he manages a Starbucks."

"I do. Nice to meet you Greg," I said, shaking his hand, then greeting Alejandra and Trent.

"Dinner is almost ready," Don said. "Can I get anyone a drink?"

"Bourbon for me," Greg said.

"White wine for me," Sonya added.

"And me," Alejandra said.

"Bourbon, please," I requested.

"For me as well," Trent said.

Both Naomi and Mary asked for white wine, and Greg went with Don to fix the drinks and bring them back.

"I had an interesting conversation with Doctor Kirilenko," I said to Mary.

"I assume you liked what he had to say?"

"Minus the fact that it would have been nice to know nine years ago, yes."

"And because of advancements in understanding, you'll have fifty years of no restrictions! I'm going to guess you'd be happy if I came up with a solution that allowed you to eat carbs?"

"Eh, I can take or leave them at this point. We've found substitutes and workarounds that allow me to have desserts and bread, and I don't miss the potatoes, rice, or corn at this point. And with a limit of 50g, I can occasionally have those, too. That said, I won't object to you finding a solution!"

"What do you think about donating your body to science upon your death?"

"I think you need to ask Birgit that question," I replied. "I'm positive she won't object to a full autopsy, but outright donation, I think she might lose her mind. Of course, simply asking her that question now would probably result in her going off on you. Being without Dad is not something my Pumpkin would like to contemplate. And not just her, but all the kids."

"Just keep it in mind," Mary said. "I know you have no religious objections."

"Neither Loki nor the Buddha give two figs about preserving the physical body after death, and the opinions of the followers of Jesus don't carry much sway, except insofar as they inform Jesse's opinion."

"He's the only one who goes to church, right?" Naomi asked.

"Yes. Birgit is the most radical of the group, and is, for all intents and purposes, a soft atheist, whereas I'm a soft agnostic."

"Soft atheist?" Sonya asked.

"She's of the opinion that there is no god or gods, though she's open to reexamining her opinion. I, on the other hand, say that I do not know, but I

believe it is likely that there is some property of the universe that approximates god, or gods. I can't tell you what it is, but I believe, based on my own personal experiences, that there is something more than the sum of all the parts. The rest of the kids have beliefs similar to mine."

"How did you end up with one going to church?"

"During my spiritual journey, we attended a Russian Orthodox church, and I found much to recommend in their view of man's relationship to the world, and we attended a number of times. With Jesse, my eldest, it took, so to speak, and he's been faithful attending since he was little. Until he could drive, his godfather would pick him up, now he drives himself."

"In a chick magnet BMW!" Mary declared as Don and Greg came back into the room with drinks.

"Jesse does not need a car, nor anything else, to attract young women!" Don declared. "There are pro athletes who would be in awe!"

"He takes after his dad," Naomi said with a smirk.

"And *nobody* is surprised by THAT!" Alejandra added with a soft laugh.

I heard a timer go off, signifying that something in the kitchen was done, and Don invited everyone to the dining room table where he and Mary sat at either end, while Naomi and Greg sat on one side and Sonya and I sat on the other.

"The only thing not 'carb safe' are the potatoes and gravy and the rolls, though they're whole grain," Mary said.

The standing rib roast was excellent, and I filled up on meat, salad, and broccoli, bypassing the mashed potatoes, but having a roll because the whole grain

attenuated the glyceemic effect, which was what everyone believed triggered my manic incidents. Low glyceemic index foods caused my blood glucose levels to rise more slowly, which made them tolerable, so long as I didn't overdo them.

"How long have you been at Mayo?" I asked Sonya.

"Five years, though the first two were the practical training part of nursing school."

Which made her around twenty-three.

"You're from the area?"

"Minnesota born and bred! I was born in Mankato, but we moved to the Twin Cities area when I was five."

"*Little House on the Prairie*," I said.

"That is the only reason anyone from more than about fifty miles away knows the town! But it wasn't in the books, just the TV show."

"I never read any of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books," I said. "My daughters have, though."

"You strike me more as 'James Bond' than 'Call of the Wild'," Sonya observed.

"How much did Naomi tell you?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Enough to know you're dangerous!" Sonya declared causing Alejandra, Mary, and Don to laugh.

"I've never once taken anyone anywhere they didn't want to go," I replied.

"Which has nothing to do with whether or not you're dangerous!" Sonya retorted.

"Danger is relative," I replied. "The most important thing is to be true to yourself, and to live a life worth living."

"Steve very much believes in calculated risk," Mary interjected, "though sometimes his risk calculations are a bit off."

"Never once have I said 'hold my beer and watch this' or done anything that even comes close to that!" I protested.

"You know darn well what I mean by that!"

"When one is surrounded by doctors, one discovers that normal risk analysis is unacceptable!"

"She married me," Don grinned. "I'm still trying to figure out if that was high risk or low risk!"

"Low!" I declared. "She wanted someone who would be there to give her a foot massage when she came home from long shifts at the hospital."

"*Pulp Fiction* fan?" Sonya asked.

"*Don't be tellin' me about foot massages. I'm the foot fuckin' master,*" I said trying to sound like Samuel L. Jackson. "*I got my technique down and everything, I don't be ticklin' or nothin'.*"

Sonya laughed, "And to hear tell you've given a million ladies a million foot massages!"

"Yes, but I'm smart enough to not give one to Marsellus Wallace's wife! Or any man's wife, for that matter!"

"I still don't understand how you do that," Don said. "It's like you can quote every movie on the planet, and communicate that way."

I grinned, "«Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra»! The cool thing about that *TNG* episode is that style of communication actually works. My kids and I use it all the time. There was a relationship commitment ceremony at my house not long ago and when my eldest son said 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...', his siblings all exclaimed 'SKIP TO THE END!' in unison."

"*The Princess Bride*," Sonya declared. "An awesome movie! I wore out our tape!"

I chuckled, "You aren't the first one to say that! My kids love the movie."

The conversation took a backseat to eating the wonderful meal, and when we finished, Mary served dessert, which for me was mixed berries in cream, while the others had apple pie. After dinner, Don offered everyone another drink, though I declined because I generally limited myself to a single glass of liquor.

"When did you want me to run you back to the hotel?" Don asked.

Mary had brought me from the hospital, as I hadn't rented a car for this trip.

"Whenever is convenient," I said.

"I can do it, Don," Sonya said. "I drive past Mayo to get home from here, so whichever hotel he's at is on my way."

"The Hilton," I said. "I appreciate it."

"Me, too," Don replied. "Thanks."

We ended up staying for another hour before I thanked Don and Mary and bade everyone 'goodbye'. Sonya and I left the house and got into her Toyota Supra.

"High School graduation present from my grandparents," she said. "No way I could have afforded it!"

"1997 model year?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Basic math!" I chuckled. "You told me how long you'd been at Mayo, and that two of the five years were your practical training. That means you graduated High School in 1996, and that would mean either a '96 or '97 model, depending on when they bought it. You're either twenty-three or twenty-four, depending on when your birthday is."

"Twenty-four last month. You look like you're about thirty, but I know you have a sixteen-year-old, so you have to be thirty-eight or thirty-nine. Well, unless you had a kid while you were in college."

"Thirty-nine back in April," I replied.

"You don't look it, at all!"

"Thanks. So just how much did Naomi tell you?"

"I think the best answer is to ask 'What does a girl have to do to go to bed with you?'"

I laughed, "Well, try knocking on the door!"

She rapped her knuckles on the dash.

"I have a clean STI test, of course. And I have an IUD."

"And you're aware of my situation?"

"Why do you think I said you're dangerous?!" Sonya asked. "Naomi told me all about the virtuoso performances and promised I wouldn't regret it."

"And what is it you're looking for?" I asked.

"I thought that was obvious!"

"I'm careful about making assumptions," I replied.

"According to Naomi, you're damned good in bed. I believe I am. Let's prove it!"

"I do have to be in decent shape for my tests tomorrow."

"Then call tonight a test run, and tomorrow night, we'll see how good it can be."

"I'm curious..." I said.

"I like sex! I'm not seeing anyone right now, and Naomi invited me to be the eighth for tonight, but as I said, she warned me. And she was right!"

"About?"

"The vibe you give off made me interested and your bedroom eyes sealed the deal."

"What vibe?"

"That you'll be the best fuck I've ever had!"

XI. Time For the Next Stage of my Life

August 13, 2002, Rochester, Minnesota

 Steve

"An excellent set of 'cumming attractions'!" Sonya declared when we got out of bed at the hotel on Tuesday morning. "I'm looking forward to tonight!"

"So it lived up to the billing?"

"It beats a foot massage!" Sonya said with a soft laugh. "And your tongue knows its way around the 'holy of holies'."

"I have a firm rule against comparisons, but I have zero complaints!"

"Why?"

"Because I think it's bad form," I replied.

"But you had to have had bad sex if you're as prolific as I suspect you are."

"Once or twice," I replied. "But those were rectified by appropriate education and instruction!"

"Oh, come on! Sonya protested as we went to the shower. "That can't possibly be true, or you're way more selective than Naomi or you have implied."

"Over two hundred," I replied.

"Holy shit!" Sonya exclaimed. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. And over half of them virgins."

"Jesus," she breathed. "And you're not joking about no bad sex."

"Sex is far more than 'Tab A into Slot B'," I replied. "It's mostly about bonding, and that changes the whole character. You're one of the rare ones who were, and I use this advisedly, a 'casual fuck'. I rarely have sex with someone I just met; it's nearly always the end result of an intimate relationship. And by that, I mean an intellectual and emotional connection of some kind. That said, as demonstrated last night, it does happen."

And, I didn't add, nearly always arranged by someone else, and in this case, that 'someone else' was Naomi, just as Katt had arranged things with Elin.

"What would you say about your kids behaving the same way?"

I chuckled, "Who says they don't? But that's totally their business. My role is to ensure they are properly educated about birth control and STIs, and at that point, it's up to them."

"Out of curiosity, how old were you?"

"Fourteen. She was twenty-three."

"Damn!" Sonya exclaimed.

"You?"

"Fifteen. He was twenty-two. How did you manage to seduce a twenty-three-year-old?"

"I didn't. I was doing yard work for her. She thought I was sixteen or seventeen. When I told her I was fourteen, she hesitated, but decided to go through with it. She taught me valuable lessons about ensuring my partner was satisfied and made it clear that any girl who offered oral sex deserved French kisses immediately afterwards."

"How long did that last?"

"Less than five seconds," I grinned.

Naomi laughed hard, "You got better!"

"Obviously! But to answer the real question, just two encounters. She was concerned about a long-term relationship that couldn't really go anywhere. You?"

"From December of my Sophomore year in High School until he moved to California for a job the following June after he graduated. My first time was an all-day sex marathon on the day after Christmas. I seduced him. After him, I mostly stuck to college guys in High School, though I went to my Senior Prom with the star fullback from our football team. In nursing school, I sampled a number of doctors and was mostly unimpressed. I think Naomi and Mary were right to avoid doctors. What about you?"

"There was a special girl after my first, but she was an exchange student, and we were only together once before she had to go home. Through her I met a girl a year older who completed my education and coached me on how to get laid, a lot. She got off on me having sex with other girls."

"In front of her?"

"On occasion, and also sex with her in front of other girls, on occasion."

"Voyeur and exhibitionist?"

"Of a sort," I replied. "She's now a well-known criminal defense attorney and has been married to her High School sweetheart for over twenty years."

"And you've been married about that long, but have a permanent hall pass."

We got out of the shower and began drying ourselves.

"It's mutual," I replied. "My wives, and I consider all three women my wives, have the exact same freedom, with the exact same rules."

Of course, none of them had ever exercised that freedom, though Jessica had come very close with Jorge.

"I've heard about 'open marriages' but never actually ran into one. I was skeptical when Naomi first told me, but she assured me that it was true."

"Cheating is not something I tolerate."

"So you've never been with a married woman?"

"I have, but in situations where I could be absolutely sure their husbands consented to and knew about the encounter. One of them has an open marriage, the other is a special circumstance that goes all the way back to High School."

We moved to the bedroom to begin dressing.

"You can't eat breakfast today, right?"

"Correct," I replied. "Mary wants a fasting glucose level and a glucose tolerance test. It's more about tracking changes than diagnostic at this point. That's true for most of the tests, as the root cause is unknown, though they suspect some kind of congenital condition with my hypothalamus. Basically, all my hormone levels are off, so to speak, in that they seem to have an exaggerated effect."

"Including testosterone!" Sonya said with a silly smile.

"That is actually one theory about my proclivity to have multiple partners."

"Do you have a specific type?"

I grinned, "Strawberry blondes with athletic builds."

"Be serious."

"I am! My eldest's mom, who came out as a lesbian in college, who was my girlfriend in High School, is a strawberry blonde. My legal wife, Jessica, is a strawberry blonde. And believe it or not, I prefer small breasts."

"Not!" Sonya said, but she was laughing. "Show me a guy who doesn't like huge jugs, and I'll show you a liar."

"And you'd be wrong," I replied. "In my mind, perfect breasts would fill a champagne glass at most. Or, as I've heard said, 'more than a mouthful is a waste'."

"And is that true about dicks?" Sonya asked as she slipped on her shoes.

"I have no idea! I've never had a dick in my mouth!"

Sonya laughed hard, "You're too funny!"

"You tell me if size matters," I replied. "It won't bother me one way or the other."

"You're nicely endowed. Not huge, but nice. And truthfully, between you and me, tongues and skills are more important than pure size. I was with one really big guy, I mean *really* big, as in eight inches and the circumference of a Coke can. But the sex wasn't better than last night. My first guy was a bit smaller than you and trust me, that had zero effect on his ability to get me off! Repeatedly!"

"I have had no complaints," I replied.

Well, that wasn't quite true. Annie's complaint was not that the sex wasn't good, but that it was inappropriate. And there had been a few complaints about ending relationships, but again, that wasn't about the sex.

"None from me, except that you needed to get decent sleep last night! Shall we head to the hospital? I'll get my breakfast in the cafeteria."

"Sounds like a plan."

[Chicago, Illinois]



Jesse

"I have our schedule," Coach Nelson said when we gathered in the locker room before hitting the ice. "Our first game is September 14th against St. Rita."

"Nothing like starting off with the toughest game of the year," I interjected.

"Which means we have to bust our butts in practice before then, gentlemen," Coach continued. "And Lane Tech is the following Saturday."

"Who hates us, Coach?" Freddy asked.

"Nobody!" Coach replied. "We have to play them eventually, and first, middle, or last, doesn't matter. We always prep hard for them, and we'll be well-rested and fresh. I want to see you digging out there. Anyone who dogs it will get fifty laps at the end of practice for their entire line!"

There were collective groans, but I understood Coach's strategy. Guys might dog it when it only affected them, but if it affected their whole line, the peer pressure would keep them from slacking off.

"Let's get out there and hit it hard, men!" Coach concluded.

"Rah!" we all exclaimed and headed for the ice.

After warmups, we played a series of scrimmages simulating game situations, including defending a five on three with the opposing goalie pulled. That was brutal, and my 'iron three' struggled to clear the puck from the zone. The only real solution was not to get into that situation by not taking dumb penalties like the ones that had cost us the playoff game the previous year.

 Birgit

"How does this work?" Julie asked as we walked towards the clinic at the hospital.

"They'll take your blood pressure, check your pulse, and listen to your heart. If they don't detect anything, they'll give you a prescription for the Pill and your first two months of pills. They'll also draw blood for an STI test."

"How much does it cost?"

"They won't charge you because you're a teenager. For adults, they charge about \$50, but if you say you can't afford it, they reduce the cost, sometimes to zero."

"How can they do that?"

"Because the clinic is funded by charity," I said. "My dad is on the Board of Directors of the biggest donor."

"I bet!" Julie giggled.

I laughed, "Not for that reason!"

"You're really OK with what Tiffany wants?"

"That's up to her," I said. "But if I asked my dad not to, he wouldn't."

"Really?"

"Really. Are you interested?"

"No. He's hot, but he's too old for me. Would you do it with someone your dad's age?"

I had, but because I was only fourteen, I couldn't say, even though it had happened in Sweden.

"Yes. My dad has some really good looking friends, but their wives wouldn't be cool with it."

"But you would?"

"My Uncle Pete or Uncle Kurt? In a heartbeat! They aren't really uncles, but that's what we call them. But my Aunt Kathy and Aunt Melanie would never go for it."

"But you thought the guy at Water Tower was a perv, right?"

"Yes, because he touched me without permission. I'd never go with him because he was fat, ugly, and dumb, but if he hadn't touched me, and had just walked away, I wouldn't have said or done anything."

We arrived at the clinic and Julie filled out her form. It had been more than three months since my previous STI test, and I'd been with three guys and Lilibeth, so I decided to have one, just to be safe. That's what Jesse and Dad did, and it made a ton of sense. Of course, answering the questions on the form meant I had to talk to the nurse about having sex.

"You're fourteen and you've had four partners?" she asked.

"Yes. And I've had an STI test, and I'm on birth control pills. I asked my parents about getting them and they took me to my gynecologist, who prescribed them."

"Nobody is forcing you to do anything?"

"No. The boys were all ones I've known since I was a baby, and the girl was someone I met earlier this year. She was the first, and it was an experiment for me."

"You know birth control pills won't protect you from STIs, right?"

I wanted to roll my eyes and say 'duh', but I didn't want the nurse to think I was irresponsible.

"Yes. That's why I'm having a test today, and I made sure the boys and the girl I was with had tests before we did anything."

"That's very responsible. Who taught you that?"

"My parents, but also I read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*, which was written by my Aunt Bethany. Well, she's not really my aunt, but that's what we call her because she and my dad have been friends since Junior High."

I wasn't sure they still were, because of the fight they'd had, but it was better to just tell it the way I had.

"OK. You're awfully young to be having sex, and for having so many partners, but you seem mature and well-informed."

"Thank you," I said, trying my hardest not to show how I felt about her comments.

She drew the blood, had me check the label on the tube matched my name and birthday, and I went back to the waiting room to wait for Julie. She came out about ten minutes later carry a small, white bag which I was sure had her birth control pills.

"Everything OK?" I asked.

"Yes. Why do you have a bandage?"

"I had an STI test because my last one was before I had sex, and I just want to be sure, even though I checked to make sure the boys and the girl had a test, which you should always do to be safe."

"That was in Doctor Bethany's book," Julie replied. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Did you swallow?"

"Yes! It's sexy, it tastes OK, and the boys really like it."

"What have you done?"

"Oral both ways, vaginal, and anal."

"NO WAY!" Julie gasped. "With Peter?"

"No. With an experienced guy who knew how to do it. It was weird, but if a guy asks, and he does what I want, I'd do that again."

"What do you like?"

"Everything!" I exclaimed. "Sex is fun and feels really good. You'll see in about five weeks!"

[Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota]

 Steve

I had my blood drawn for the fasting glucose panel, then had the glucose tolerance test, which made me lightheaded and gave me manic feelings. The only saving grace was the nuclear stress test, which had me on a treadmill for an extended period before I had my cardiac ultrasound. Once those were complete, I joined Mary and Naomi for lunch.

"I'll get a report, obviously, but anything on the cardiac test?" Mary asked.

"Nary a blip on the monitor and the ultrasound tech said she didn't see anything obvious."

"Your results for the glucose tolerance test were similar to your past tests, so not really any change there other than what I'd call normal variation. Your fasting glucose was in your normal range. I also received the results from the other tests and everything is in your normal range. Your lipid panel was perfect."

"And the MRI EEG was negative for brain matter?" Naomi teased. "You know, normal for a guy!"

"Despite Steve's 'body count', as some of his female friends call it, he doesn't actually think with his member. For him, sex is mostly cerebral."

"I like smart girls," I replied. "The two at this table are perfect examples. And you know my wives are a PhD Chemist, an MD, and a future JD. I'm curious about last night..."

"I simply invited her to dinner to round out the group," Naomi said. "Everything else was her."

"Not even close!" I declared. "She had *way* more information than a woman invited to a dinner gathering!"

"You're busted, Naomi," Mary said. "He's not upset, just curious."

"I wasn't available," Naomi said. "Greg and I are serious, so I thought Steve might enjoy some company. He appears to have done so."

"I did. And Mary is right; I'm not upset, just curious. But in the future, please check with me."

"Sorry," Naomi said, sounding chagrined.

"That wasn't a reprimand," I said gently, "simply a request for the future."

"Dialing things back?" Mary asked.

"Being a bit more selective," I replied. "Aided by the fact that I'm moving into 'too old' territory for most girls under twenty. The twenty-year age gap is pretty significant, even if I'm in good shape."

"I know you're meeting with Clara after your CT, but would you give me a clue? She only shares the relevant parts of her inquiry."

"The short version? Partly me drawing back from being the type-A entrepreneur and focusing on coding, partly the social environment, and what I said before about age. It is, in effect, time for the next stage of my life."

"And you're happy with that?"

"I'm content to allow the new stage to unfold as it should."

"Spock, in *Undiscovered Country*, right?" Naomi asked.

"Yes. Not in the sense of determinism, but in the sense of what's right for me, based on my own decisions and actions. All I ever wanted in my life was to be free to act, and not be compelled to do anything I didn't want to do or be anyone I didn't want to be. What I've always wanted to do is program, and finally, I'm at a point where I can do that full time."

"And that changes your approach to life completely?" Mary asked.

I chuckled, "I didn't say I was going to become a monk! Nor that I was going to have no new relationships, only that I was dialing things back a bit."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

I saw Viktoria in the stands and raised my stick to her when she waved.

"Who's the smoking hot blonde?" Freddy asked.

"A girl I know from church."

"I think I need to start going to your church! There's nobody who looks like that at my church! I'd worship her all day!"

"Damn, Jesse," Mitch, one of our Freshmen who had made the third D-line, said. "She's here for you?"

"We have a date this afternoon."

"Unreal," he said, shaking his head.

"THIS ISN'T A QUILTING BEE!" Coach Palmer, the D-line coach, called out. "Get moving men, or there will be laps!"

"YES COACH!" Freddy and Mitch called back to their positions.

We finished practice, and after showering, Nicholas and I left the locker room together. I'd let him know that Viktoria would be riding home with us, so he wasn't surprised when she met us in the lobby. She hugged me and kissed me, and a bunch of the guys whistled or cat called. Viktoria smiled, blew them a kiss, but then kissed me again.

We went out to Aunt Kara's SUV, loaded our gear, and then Viktoria got into the passenger seat while Nicholas sat in the second row. I got into the driver's seat and after everyone had buckled in, set out for home.

"What position do you play, Nicholas?" Viktoria asked.

"Right wing on the third offensive line," Nicholas replied.

"You're a Freshman, right?"

"Yes! This is my first year on the team. I've played on Park District teams until now, same as Jesse did before High School."

"Are you guys good enough to win the league or whatever?"

"We should be," I replied. "We won the citywide tournament when I was a Freshman and just missed out on the finals last year. We lost some good players who graduated, but we gained some good ones, too, including Nicholas. You're welcome to come to our games, which are mostly on Saturdays. You won't be able to come to Sunday games, most likely."

"No way. Dad thought you had your priorities messed up, but Father Basil gave you permission, right?"

"I wouldn't call it permission so much as understanding," I countered. "But he didn't give me grief about it once we talked it through years ago."

"Do you go to church, Nicholas?"

"Only on Christmas and Easter because dad wants to go. Mom isn't religious at all, kind of like Jesse's dad."

"I think your mom is closer to Birgit than to Dad," I said. "Though your mom will at least set foot in a church. Birgit would never, but that's probably a good thing because it would probably collapse around her!"

"She's that bad?" Viktoria asked.

"Not the way you mean, but she refers to God as an imaginary invisible magic being or some other irreverent phrase. She also considers praying no different from rubbing a magic lamp to get wishes from a «djinn», with the comment that you're more likely to get the wishes than to have prayers granted, at least the way the religious girls at her school believe."

"That seems rude," Viktoria observed.

"She's entitled to her opinion just as we are and just as Nicholas is. Do you know what Thomas Jefferson said about religion?"

"No."

"Nicholas?" I asked, positive he would know.

"It does me no harm for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

"Exactly," I said. "It's the fanatics who want to impose their religion on people, or who want to deny people their freedom of religion who are a problem, not an atheist like my sister who simply rejects belief in God. If you don't bother her, she won't bother you. If you get in her face, well, good luck to you!"

"She has a brown belt in karate," Nicholas observed. "And is going to have a black belt soon!"

"It would be more of a tongue lashing than a butt kicking," I chuckled. "But the butt kicking might happen if you didn't back off after she asked you to!"

We arrived home after dropping Nicholas at his house, and I put my gear in the drying room before making lunch for Viktoria and me. Once we'd eaten, we went up to my room to spend the afternoon fooling around.

[Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota]

 Steve

"Hi, Steve," Doctor Clara Brown said as I walked into her office following my CT scan.

"Hi," I replied. "Am I glowing?"

She laughed, "You just came from your CT scan, right?"

"Yes. Full body, so enough radiation to last a lifetime. But it's the only scan I haven't had before, so it's just Mary throwing the kitchen sink at my condition."

"Have a seat and we'll get started."

I sat down in a comfortable chair that faced her desk. She ran through the usual questions about changes in my health, diet, and relationships.

"Third wife?" she asked with an arched eyebrow. "Will there be a fourth?"

"No. I'm pretty sure we discussed my history of having three girls close to me and we've finally found the final configuration, as it were."

"And other girls?"

"Yes, but fewer. As I said to Mary earlier, this is a new stage in my life."

"Describe that for me, if you would."

"It starts with me finally being able to do what I've wanted to do for the past twenty-five years -- be a full-time software engineer. I've been working towards it, and finally, I disposed of the last thing blocking me. I'm still President of the company, and the largest shareholder, but I have no executive responsibilities.

"With the final configuration I just mentioned, I think, finally, I have the absolute stability in my long-term relationships I need, and my role at home is limited to an advisory one, for the most part. Suzanne handles the finances, and the kids basically take care of themselves, needing only a bit of guidance to keep them coloring inside the lines."

"If I recall correctly, there was another long-term girlfriend."

I nodded, "Natalie. She'll be with us until she graduates. She's planning on going to graduate school in Russia and will complete a PhD in Russian history."

"When is that?"

"Just under two years from now," I replied.

"Are there others?"

"A Japanese woman, Yuriko, who is at the house most of the time, though she's home in Japan until Friday. When she graduates, which is in three years, she'll return to Japan. There's also another young woman, Katelyn, who I'm seeing semi-regularly, and I don't know how long that will last."

"So what does 'dialing back' look like to you?"

"Fewer partners," I replied. "And once Natalie, Yuriko, and Katelyn are out of the picture, there very likely won't be any long-term relationships."

"Define 'long term', please," Doctor Brown requested.

"More than a few encounters," I replied.

"Have your preferences changed?"

"No," I replied with a grin, "but the girls who are in my preference group are, more and more, seeing me as 'too old'. Until recently, maybe two-thirds wouldn't have felt I was too old, now I'd say it's close to eighty percent who would."

"Teenage girls, right?"

"Pretty much; girls in their early twenties are less likely to see me as too old at this point. But that will happen, too."

"You seem to be OK with it."

I shrugged, "Does it matter? I mean, you know my views on the matter, and I have to deal with reality. It doesn't upset me."

"And given what I know about your past, there will be girls who don't object, even if they are very few and far between, which, I would guess, feeds into your comment about dialing back, and might even have caused it."

"I think it's a mix of opportunity and where I am in my life. Not to mention the maturity of the average teenager is nothing like it was even ten years ago."

"On that, I'll agree with you."

"Add in the demonization of sex, especially teen sexuality, and you have a very different environment from the one in which you and I were raised and went to college."

"For sure," Doctor Brown agreed.

"Society has lost the plot," I continued. "And that has created an unhealthy environment for teens in many areas, but specifically with regard to sexuality. The entire system seems hellbent on infantilizing teenagers."

"There certainly has been a change since the 70s and early 80s when we were teens."

"The problem is going to be exacerbated because so many people are being told over and over that the government can solve any problem, and they're starting to believe it, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. They're receiving a piss-poor education with regard to basic economics and have no concept of how economies work and how supply and demand work. They're being given NO civics education. We've let the NEA destroy our education system, and they did it with intent, wanting nothing but serfs for the all-powerful government to control and order around."

"What triggered that rant?" Doctor Brown inquired.

"Your comment about the 70s and 80s. I was simply commenting on how we got where we are and how we're being led, where we're going. And it's going to get worse. I'm pretty sure we discussed my opinion of how children are being raised to be helpless, and that feeds into the comment I made before about the NEA and those who believe that citizens exist for the benefit of the state, rather than the

other way around. That last bit is upending the «kami» of the US and is going to end very badly."

"Let's discuss your children, if that's OK."

"It is."

"Are you aware of any sexual activity?"

"I know it happens, but I mind my own business, which is what I expect everyone else on the planet to do, which they, sadly, do not."

"Which kids, if it's OK to ask."

"The three oldest," I replied. "Jesse, Matthew, and Birgit. They're sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen."

"And you're totally comfortable with that, right?"

"Totally. As are their moms. Our closest friends have the same basic attitude, though some are not quite as comfortable with their kids expressing their sexuality as I and the mothers to my kids are."

"Would you be open to me interviewing your kids?"

"I would, and I'm positive they'd agree, but you can't agree to the conditions I'd set - that any conversations you have with them are strictly private and that you won't reveal anything you hear to anyone, including me, and more importantly, the government. Unless there is a specific exemption to mandatory reporting you can point to in the Minnesota statutes, then I have to say 'no'."

"Implying your kids have had lovers who are over eighteen."

"Infer what you will," I replied. "I won't confirm or deny anything, as I have no knowledge. But I'm not about to risk the investigations."

Not quite true, as I knew Jesse had been with April, and I knew Matthew was with Chelsea, who had turned eighteen, but plausible deniability had to be maintained.

"There is no exemption in Minnesota law of which I'm aware."

"The same is true for Illinois. Ohio has some exemptions, but you aren't licensed there."

"The counselor with whom you discussed your sister is in Ohio, right? And she looked into the exemptions?"

"Yes. Given we were both over eighteen, the mandatory reporting requirement didn't apply, and the statute of limitations had expired, so criminal prosecution wasn't possible. Wisconsin does have an exception for research, but it's one of the few states which does."

"How do you happen to know that?"

"Doctor Bethany Krajick used my case in her Master's thesis. She obfuscated the facts to prevent anyone from figuring it out. Her conclusions were wrong, but that's because the thesis was written before things went to hell between me and my sister, as we discussed last time."

"I think the risk of being found out is minimal," Doctor Brown said, "but there is no way I can take even that minimal risk given the penalties would cost me my license and could lead to prosecution."

"I wouldn't expect you to. This just goes to show the flaws with the system. I totally understand the problem they were trying to solve, but as with most things, the government used a flamethrower and burned down the house trying to remove a wasp nest. And that feeds into the demonization of sexuality, because you can't have a sex-positive conversation with a teenager without risking having to report the Sophomore who was 'abused' by her Senior boyfriend because she hadn't turned sixteen before he turned eighteen, despite the fact their sexual relationship existed before that."

"Some states do have provisions that prevent that from happening."

"Not Wisconsin or California, to give two examples. But the point remains, you can't get the positive message out because of the mandatory reporting laws. And that's a problem."

"Circling back to you, are you happy?"

"You mean with my transition into the next stage of my life? Absolutely. I'm by no means ancient, but I'm also not twenty-five! And life isn't static. Things will change and I'll adapt to those changes."

"Is there anything that's bothering you? I mean, other than government and society?"

"No! You just hit on the two things, which are really the same, that bug me to no end! As I've repeatedly said, if people would just mind their own business and live and let live, the world would be a much, much better place!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"I want to see you again!" Vitoria said as we got out of the shower.

"I'm busy all next week," I said. "So it can't be before the 24th."

"Bummer," she said, pouting. "School starts that week for me, which makes it impossible!"

"I think the only way it can happen during the school year is if you tell your dad you want to see me."

"Oh, right, like THAT will work!"

"Not to be a jerk, but if you hadn't lied to him about us, we might have been able to make it work."

"That's not fair, Jesse!"

"It's the truth," I replied, disregarding her use of the 'f' word. "You complained to him, then you lied to him. And now there's no way back that I can see unless you can convince him it's OK to see me."

"I can't!" Viktoria protested.

"Then I don't know what you want me to do," I replied.

We finished drying ourselves and went to my room, where we began dressing. I really did want to see Viktoria again because she was a lot of fun, was smoking hot, and was very enthusiastic. The problem was she'd dug herself a hole out of which she couldn't climb.

"Maybe I can talk to my mom and see what she says," Viktoria said. "But I don't know if it will help."

"All you could do is try," I replied. "But if you tell her the truth now, I think we're basically hosed."

"This sucks!" Viktoria groused.

It did, but there wasn't much I could do about it, if anything. Her dad would never trust me, and that was Viktoria's fault. We finished dressing, then went downstairs for some lemonade. Once we'd each drunk our glass, we went out to the car so I could drive her home.

 Birgit

"Are you willing to have a threesome with me and another girl?" I asked Peter as I gently rode him.

"Uh, sure," he replied. "But can we talk after?"

I laughed, nodded, then leaned down to kiss him. Boys couldn't concentrate on more than one thing at a time, and I was sure having his dick in my pussy was the only thing he could think about, if he was even thinking! I focused on giving myself a pair of really good orgasms before Peter shot off in me, and when he had, I stretched out on top of him.

"Julie and I want to have a threesome with you," I said. "She had her test today, and got the Pill, so it'll be five weeks. If you're interested."

"Uh, yeah, I uh, am," Peter stammered. "Would, uhm, you two do stuff?"

"Yes! And you can watch!"

I almost laughed because I felt his dick twitch when I said that. He was like putty in my hands and I was sure I could get him to do whatever I wanted. Maybe

finding an older guy wasn't so important after all. I could train Peter exactly the way I wanted him to pleasure me and we could try everything in Aunt Bethany's book.

"We can try other stuff before then," I said.

"Like what?" he asked.

"All the stuff in the book," I replied. "A tit fuck, anal, and chocolate sauce!"

"Anal? Like in your butt? Isn't that gross?"

"I don't think so, but if you don't want to, you don't have to. But I would, with you."

"Have you done that?"

"Once."

"I don't know," he replied timidly.

"Just think about it," I replied. "I can get some chocolate syrup and we can spread it on each other and lick it off! And we can use the sauna and do it in there and in the whirlpool."

"Those sound fine, but why would you want me to do it between your boobs?"

"So you could cum on my face! I think that would be so cool!"

"Really?" he asked, sounding doubtful.

"Really! I want to try everything! That's the only way to find out what you like!"

"I guess," he replied.

Well, maybe I was wrong about being able to train him, but I was going to try! I moved off him, slid down, and took him into my mouth. It didn't take long to get him hard, and I straddled him again so I could ride him. I came three times before he did, and when we finished, we went to the shower.

"You really want to do all that stuff?" Peter asked as we washed ourselves.

"I really do," I replied. "Read that section of the book and think about it, OK?"

"OK," he replied.

We finished in the shower, dried off, dressed, changed the sheets on my bed, then I walked him to the door. We kissed, and he headed home, while I went to find Ashley, who was in the sunroom.

"Done already?" she asked with a smirk.

"He had chores to do before Dave and Julia get home from work."

"Bummer for you!" she teased. "We need to get dinner started."

"Then let's go!"

[Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota]

 Steve

"What's your pleasure?" I asked when Sonya and I arrived at the hotel after having a nice dinner at a local diner she liked.

"Orgasms!" Sonya declared.

"Obviously," I chuckled. "How would you like to achieve them?"

"I cum hardest from oral, if done expertly. You showed me last night that you're an expert! How about we sixty-nine, fuck, sixty-nine, fuck, repeating until you can't get it up, then you lick me to a dozen orgasms!"

"Greedy, aren't we?" I teased.

"Not my fault girls can have multiple orgasms without resting while guys have one and have to rest in between!"

"I shall endeavor to provide the lady maximum pleasure!"

"Then get your clothes off, get in bed, and we'll get started."

She didn't have to ask twice!

XII. There Are Some Things a Dad Just Doesn't Need to Know!

August 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I have Doctor Mary Whittaker on the line for you," Kimmy said over the intercom early on Friday afternoon.

"Put her through, please."

Kimmy did, and when the phone buzzed, I picked up the handset.

"Hi, Mary," I said.

"All your scans were clean, as we expected, though there was a minor anomaly with the shape of your hypothalamus, but it's in line with deviations from the norm, and other individuals with the same deviation do not exhibit your symptoms or anything close. It's similar to a slight deviation from the norm for your xiphoid process, and misshapen patellae."

"I had no idea about those last two."

"You wouldn't because for you, they don't seem different, and you've never had an exam that would show the deviations until now. Neither of those are anything more than notations which might come into play if you needed surgery or damaged your knees in some way. The anomaly with your hypothalamus could

be indicative, but as we have no other cases like yours, and it's in line with normal deviations, it's interesting, but not diagnostic, at least at this point.

"I've faxed a complete report to Doctor Kulczycki, and I'll fax you a summary, along with the letter signed by Doctor Kirilenko and me clearing you for sparring and any other activity that might involve blows to the head. Obviously, you should avoid blows to the head as a general principle of health, but you have no more risk than the average person. OK to fax those to your private fax machine?"

"Yes. Do me a favor and fax the entire report to Al Barton. Send him CDs or DVDs with the scans as well, please."

"Afraid Jess won't accept our findings?"

"Let's just say I want Al to have the raw data to share with the head of neuro when Jess asks for a third opinion."

"Will do. I'll send the faxes to you and Doctor Barton right away, and send the discs to him by UPS or FedEx. He'll have them Monday."

"Thanks, Mary. See you Labor Day weekend!"

"We're looking forward to it!"

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"What will Jessica object to?" Penny asked.

"Please keep this to yourself until Monday, but the neurologist at Mayo cleared me to spar."

"Whoa! What about your post-concussion syndrome?"

"The latest research says that unless you have misaligned vertebrae, the risks are no greater than for a normal person."

"You are NOT normal!"

"No kidding," I chuckled. "The real risk is repetitive blows to the head, like with boxers. I wasn't allowed to spar because of the *risk* of it happening, not because it happens a lot."

"So I can throw Nerf balls at your head?"

"I'd threaten to turn you over my knee, but you'd enjoy that!"

"Please?! Now?!" Penny asked, her voice dripping with desire.

"You know the rules, Penelope!"

"SIX! And you are just no fun!"

 Birgit

"There is literally nothing good playing at the theater," I said to Jesse late on Friday afternoon.

"I know," he replied. "I checked with Dad and he was OK if we invite everyone back here to watch whatever is on HBO or Showtime, or one of the DVDs we have."

"It's too bad 'Skinemax' doesn't run their interesting stuff until 10:30pm!" I giggled.

Jesse laughed, "What do you need softcore porn for? You and Peter have been screwing yourselves silly since we came home from Sweden!"

"And you and Angelina. And Viktoria. And Scarlett will be here on Sunday! Are we going to Giordano's or Chinese?"

"Chinese," Jesse said. "Just so you know, Nicholas will be joining us. Tom was cool with it, but I suggest we don't say anything about the trouble between Dad and Bethany."

"Are any new guys from your team going to be there?"

"Tired of Peter already?" Jesse teased.

"What-ever," I replied, rolling my eyes. "So?"

"Mitch, Steve, Tom, and George," I said. "Freddy will be there, of course, along with Pete. Angelina is bringing some new cheerleaders, too."

"More virgin pussy for you!" I teased.

"What-ever!" he retorted, obviously mocking me. "I plan to leave in about fifteen minutes. Does that work for you?"

"Yes. Let me let Mom know we're going and I'll come over to the coach house."

"Cool."

He left, and I went to find Mom, who was in the sunroom with Stephe and Ashley.

"I'm heading out to meet the usual Friday night gang," I said to Mom. "There are some new kids from Jesse's team and some new cheerleaders, along with the usual group. There's nothing at the movies, so we're all going to come here and watch something. I suggested *Debbie Does Dallas* or *Insatiable*."

Mom laughed, "And just where do you propose to get those?"

"The room behind the curtain at the video store!" I giggled.

"You have to be eighteen," Mom countered. "And how do you know about those movies?"

"I've heard Dad mention them and I've seen references to them when reading about 'culture wars'."

"And do you want to see them?" Mom asked.

I shrugged, "Maybe out of curiosity. I did joke with Jesse about Cinemax being 'Skinemax'."

Mom laughed, "They do push the edge of the envelope. I'd advise against that because most parents would object and it could cause all kinds of problems."

"It was just teasing, Mom," I said. "I'm going over to the coach house and we'll be home after dinner."

"Does your dad know the kids are coming over?"

"Jesse checked with him."

"OK. Have fun!"

I left and headed to the coach house to hang out with Jesse until it was time to leave.

 Steve

"What is this?" Jessica asked when I handed her the letter from Mary and Doctor Kirilenko.

"My clearance to spar," I replied. "From the Mayo neurologist and Mary Whittaker."

"No way, Tiger! You know the risks. How did you talk them into this?"

"I didn't. Doctor Kirilenko brought it up after Mary asked him to consult. AI will have a complete set of test results and evaluations, including discs with the full-body electron beam CT scan on Monday. You can review the images yourself, but there are no anomalies, and the latest research shows that the problem is related to misaligned vertebrae, which I do not have."

"Do not act on this until I review everything," Jessica insisted.

"Babe, you're a trauma surgeon, not a neurologist, but I'll wait until you speak to the head of neurology at UofC, which I am positive you will do tomorrow, even if you have to call him at home. Your dad will have everything you need."

"Jess, why take such a hard line?" Suzanne asked.

"Because I fought her on this when I first received the diagnosis," I quickly interjected, "and I've violated the prohibition three or four times. In addition, given my past relationship with Mary, she suspects I used my charm to influence Mary's decision."

"What he said!" Jessica declared with a smile. "I'll review the results with Dad and with Doctor Kleinhardt, the head of neuro. And I'll listen to what they have to say."

"That's all I can ask for, Babe. Suzanne, did Yuriko get in safely?"

"Yes. She's napping in Natalie's room. She asked me to wake her for dinner."

As if on cue, Ashley came into the 'Indian' room just then to let us know that dinner was ready. Suzanne went to wake Yuriko, and five minutes later she joined us in the dining room, along with Natalie, but not Albert, who was hanging out with Nicky Kallas.

"Hello, Steve-sama!" she exclaimed, bowing.

I stood and bowed, not quite as deeply, "Hello, Yuriko-chan. How were your flights?"

"Long and tiring," she replied as we both sat down, "but I am happy to be here! I will go back to bed after dinner. Tomorrow I will be refreshed!"



August 17, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I think you handled Jess perfectly last night," Kara said as she, Suzanne, and I walked home from the hospital on Saturday morning. "I was afraid you would take her bait and it would start a fight."

"I had plenty of time to think about it," I replied. "Doctor Kirilenko told me on Monday afternoon that if the scans didn't show any problems, he'd clear me

based on the latest research. Fundamentally, the problem is with repetitive blows to the head, like with boxers. I looked it up, and the medical term coined to replace the vernacular 'punch drunk' was *dementia pugilistica*, or *fistfighter's dementia*. When the evidence discovered that repeated mild head trauma caused brain injuries, and was more than just boxers, they started talking about 'chronic traumatic encephalopathy'."

"Not to rain on your parade, but isn't that a risk?" Suzanne asked.

"Not the way it would be for a boxer or football player, gridiron or Association."

"Soccer?" Suzanne asked. "There's no tackling like American football."

"Heading the ball is a normal activity. I haven't seen evidence, so I'm just speculating. Gridiron, I think, is obvious. I suspect rugby and ice hockey would have potential problems as well. Or at least that's what I speculate based on what the docs at Mayo said. Going back to sparring, I'm not competing, so the risk of blows to the head is minimal, and even if I were competing, it would take a decade to have as many blows to the head as a single professional boxing match or gridiron football game!"

"Are you worried about Jesse?" Kara asked.

"No. He doesn't stop too many pucks with his helmet, and goalies aren't hit very often. And it's a 'no check' league, so I'm not worried about Nicholas, either. College hockey would be different, but my Duck is a goalkeeper, so relatively safe from contact or fights. And Jesse is pretty level-headed."

"You seem confident Jessica will come around," Suzanne observed.

"She's first and foremost a physician. She'll look at the evidence, speak to the head of neuro, and check the literature, and concede that Doctor Kirilenko and

Mary are correct in their assessment. It's not an area where Jess has any more knowledge than the typical medical student because she's a trauma surgery specialist and doesn't keep up with literature on head injuries because she simply doesn't have time to keep up with everything. Heck, she has trouble keeping up with advances in trauma and surgery."

"And Jess is a worrywart," Kara said. "Though not as much as she has been in the past."

"Jess? A worrywart?" I asked with a grin. "Compared to Birgit?"

"About YOU," Kara declared. "I could be raptured right now and Birgit wouldn't miss me!"

I laughed, "You don't believe in the Rapture! And neither does Birgit!"

"You know what I mean!" Kara protested mirthfully. "The 'cold war' might be over, but I'm still extraneous in her mind."

"Ask Jess about Albert," I chuckled. "The only adults he has ANY use for are Al, my dad, his scout leaders, the Navy men, and Aimee because she's Navy and a pilot."

"Pilots are boys who never grow up!" Kara declared.

I chuckled, "One of the Navy guys told Albert that he had to make up his mind about growing up or becoming a Navy pilot, because nobody can do both!"

Both Kara and Suzanne laughed.

"I'd say that fits!" Kara declared. "What's the plan for today?"

"Cuddles, breakfast, karate, lunch, karate, then Guys' Night and Girls' Night Out."

"Kristin and Erika are visiting tomorrow, right?"

"That's the plan, yes," I confirmed.

"What about Yuriko? I'm sure she'll want time with you."

"I'm sure she will," I replied. "Now that Natalie is back, she'll want some time as well. They'll ask and I'll work it out."

 Birgit

I cuddled Dad, we had breakfast, then I went next door to see Aunt Penny. I needed help with something and she was the only one I could think of who might help and would also keep it between us.

"Hi, Birgit," Terry said when I came to the door. "I'll get Amber."

"I actually wanted to speak to Aunt Penny, if that's OK."

"Sure. She's in the in the great room."

He let me in and I walked into the great room.

"Hi, Birgit!" she said.

"Hi, Aunt Penny."

"Amber is in her room."

"I was actually here to speak to you."

"Come sit by me and tell me what's going on."

I walked over to the couch and sat next to her the way I had when she'd told me about her and dad.

"I need a favor," I said.

Penny laughed softly, "You can have Terry only if you convince your dad to be with me!"

I laughed, "Not that! But good to know!"

"Don't hold your breath. Your dad seems immune!"

"And when you were fifteen?"

"I told you that story! But I decided to work for NIKA, and ever since, he's been mean about it! And no fun!"

I laughed, "You know he teases you, right?"

"Obviously! So what is it you need?"

"I know you've seen Aunt Bethany's book, and there's some stuff in there I was thinking about trying, but I don't think I can get what I need because I'm not eighteen."

"What did you want?"

"Toys!" I giggled. "The book was kind of vague, but I figured out some of the stuff."

"So you want a dildo, a vibrator, and some soft cloth or ropes?"

"I think I need a harness, too."

Penny laughed hard, "You might want to wait until you're a bit older for that!"

"Why? I've done most of the other stuff in the book! Including with a girl!"

Penny laughed again, "And how much does your dad know?"

"Just that I'm not a virgin and it was with Kjell. I'm pretty sure he suspects Peter and I are fooling around, but he doesn't know the others."

"I figured you would tell him everything! In detail!"

"I decided it was better to not share everything with him. So, can you get me those things?"

"I can, but I'm not sure I should."

"Why?"

"First, even though you are very mature, you're only fourteen. Second, I'm not sure your mom and dad would approve."

"Dad won't care!"

"Then why not ask him?"

"Because of what I said before. Being circumspect makes more sense."

And had I done that, I might have been able to convince dad to give me an expert deflowering! I'd learned my lesson, though, and I was going to be careful, though Tiffany would get to know literally everything, as would Lilibeth.

"Also, if you're thinking of doing what I think you're thinking of, Peter is only fourteen, and I'm not sure he's ready for something like that. Have you asked him?"

"Uhm, no."

"Have you had it done to you?"

I nodded, "Once."

"And did you like it?"

"It was sexy, and I'd do it with a boy if he'd do what I wanted."

"Can we make a deal?"

"Convince dad?" I asked with a smirk.

Penny laughed, "In my dreams, and you can try, but he'll say 'no'. What I was going to suggest was that you speak with Katy. If she thinks it's OK, have her get in touch with me and I'll get you the things you want. Well, I'll get you a vibrator now if you need one, but you could get that at CVS as a 'personal massager'."

I giggled, "I had no idea!"

"You could also get a shower massage."

"A shower massage?"

"There was a commercial when I was growing up where they sang a jingle that went '*Why just turn on the water, when the water can turn you on?*'. It had a pulse setting and I think you can imagine how that would work!"

"Point it at my clit!" I declared.

"Yes. You could ask your dad for one. I'd pay good money to see his reaction!"

"I'll IM with Katy," I said. "And thanks."

"You're welcome!"

I left Aunt Penny's house and walked home to get ready for karate. I was really tempted to ask Dad about Penny, but I knew he had rules about girls from work, and it could cause all kinds of trouble if anyone ever found out, which meant he wouldn't do it. I wanted to IM with Katy right away, but because of karate, that would have to wait.

 Jesse

"Hi!" Libby said when she arrived at the house on Saturday morning. "Sorry I missed last night, but we only arrived home at 9:00pm."

"It's OK. How was California?"

"Parts were fun and parts were boring. My parents thought touring wineries in the Napa Valley was the height of excitement. I was bored to tears, and I wasn't even allowed to taste any wine! San Francisco was cool, though, and I'd have stayed there if they would have let me!"

"Have you seen Karli? She wasn't at the restaurant last night, and I'm pretty sure Birgit invited her."

"We broke up," Libby frowned.

"When?"

"She texted me last week that she met someone."

"OK, now THAT is low! Breaking up by SMS?"

"It sucked, obviously, and it was the same day we went to Napa Valley, so I was already in a bad mood."

"You guys were only gone three weeks!"

"I know," Libby sighed. "I think she was cheating on me before. There were clues, but I just chalked it up to it being Summer and her doing stuff with her parents."

"So now what?" I asked.

"I find a new girlfriend or boyfriend. I had time to get over it, and as you and I have talked about, we're only sixteen, so it's not like we're ready to get married or anything."

"True."

"You wouldn't have an hour or two to spend in bed with a close friend, would you?"

"I'm meeting Angelina and some cheerleaders for lunch," I replied.

Libby laughed softly, "Of course you are! No V-cards, right?"

"Right. They were wise enough to give up that idea, though now they're talking about 'initiation rites' and I think that's an equally dumb idea because if anyone found out, it would be even worse than last year with the softball team."

"So no virgin Freshmen cheerleaders for you?"

I grinned, "I didn't say that! I'd have to be sure they wanted to do it and weren't doing it as some sort of requirement or because of peer pressure."

"Will you take me to bed?" Libby asked.

"Are we starting up again? Or is this a one-time thing?"

"Is that important right now?"

"I just want to know what to expect before I say 'yes' or 'no'."

Libby shrugged, "I don't know about that, but what I do know is I need you to make love to me and cuddle me."

"Make love?" I asked.

"I need gentle and loving, not energetic. Don't read anything into me using 'love', but I didn't know a better way to express what I need. Saying 'fuck' or 'screw' implies it being about sex when what I need is to feel close."

"Because you feel rejected by Karli?"

"I guess," Libby said. "Will you?"

I contemplated if it was something I could do for her, and decided it was. I took her hand and led her up the stairs.

 Birgit

When we arrived home from Karate, I excused myself and went up to my room so I could IM with Katy, but she wasn't on-line, so I went back downstairs and had lunch with Dad, Mom, and my sisters. I was happy that Yuriko was back because she'd taught me how to cook Japanese food, which I really liked. Dad liked it too, but he couldn't have rice or tempura because of the carbs. More importantly, I could learn how Japanese women ran everything while letting the men think they were in charge!

When I finished eating, I went back up to my room and was happy to see Katy was online.

DadsPumpkin: Hi!

AppleOrchardKaty: Hi! How are you?

DadsPumpkin: Good! I need some advice.

AppleOrchardKaty: About?

DadsPumpkin: What do you think? 😊

AppleOrchardKaty: Sex, of course!

DadsPumpkin: Obviously!

AppleOrchardKaty: You enjoyed your trip to Sweden?

DadsPumpkin: Yes! I had my first time and had a VERY special encounter!

Details when I see you!

AppleOrchardKaty: OK. What advice?

DadsPumpkin: You know I read Bethany's book. There's some stuff in there I want to try.

AppleOrchardKaty: With a willing, knowledgeable partner, experimentation can be good, so long as you are clear about your limits.

DadsPumpkin: This is me rolling my eyes because the older guys I would do it with aren't interested or aren't available!

AppleOrchardKaty: You have to be very careful with boys or girls your age. What were you thinking?

DadsPumpkin: Toys!

AppleOrchardKaty: That might be a bit much at fourteen. Have you talked to your Aunt Elyse about that?

DadsPumpkin: No. Why?

AppleOrchardKaty: You should. Just ask her. I'm sure she'll discuss it with you, but I can't say more about that other than her experience is relevant to the advice you want.

DadsPumpkin: Penny sent me to you! Now you send me to Elyse!

AppleOrchardKaty: If you want my advice, wait until you're older.

DadsPumpkin: Grr!

AppleOrchardKaty: Talk to Elyse, please.

DadsPumpkin: Fine.

AppleOrchardKaty: Don't be that way, Birgit. You know I care for you and only want the best for you. Notice I'm suggesting further discussion with someone with more relevant experience. I was eighteen when I lost my virginity, and never did anything extreme, not even with your dad.

DadsPumpkin: From what I hear, that's what dad prefers.

AppleOrchardKaty: Your dad is special because he allows the girls to lead and basically does whatever they want.

DadsPumpkin: Ha! As if!

AppleOrchardKaty: And you know why that couldn't happen. Promise me you'll speak with Elyse.

DadsPumpkin: I don't have a choice, really. Penny said she'd only help me get the toys if you said it was OK.

AppleOrchardKaty: Get in touch with Elyse, and then we can talk again.

DadsPumpkin: OK. Love you, Katy! <3

AppleOrchardKaty: Love you, too, Birgit! I need to get to work! Chat soon! L8r!

DadsPumpkin:

I closed my IM, then went downstairs to wait for Dad so we could go to the dojo for the class for his students.

 Jesse

"Thank you," Libby said as we left the house. "You said you're busy all week?"

"Yes, but we'll join the gang on Friday evening. It's pizza this week. I don't think anything is playing at the movies, so we'll probably come back to my house and watch HBO, Showtime, or a DVD."

"That's cool! Go have fun eating your cheerleaders!" she teased.

"Eating WITH the cheerleaders," I corrected with a grin.

"Want to hear something I heard the other day about the difference between men and women?"

"Sure. Serious or a joke?"

"Both, I think. The primary difference between a man and a woman is that man gets his self-esteem when a woman says 'yes' and a woman gets hers when she says 'no'."

"Interesting," I replied. "I'd say that's true for people who follow social convention about guys being studs and girls being sluts, but I think that's bullshit, and you know it. Would what you said apply to you?"

"No way!" Libby exclaimed. "But to most people? I think so."

"Probably."

"What flavors?" Libby asked.

"Flavors?"

"The girls!"

I laughed, "Dark chocolate, light chocolate, latte, and vanilla!"

Libby laughed as well, "Two black girls, one Hispanic girl, and a white girl?"

"Yep!"

"All with cherries! Enjoy!"

"You're goofy!" I declared.

"Thanks!"

She turned left to head home, and I turned right to head for the diner across from the hospital. Ten minutes later, I walked into the diner to find Angelina, Ebele, Ime, Estefana, and Robin seated in a booth for six, with Robin and Estefana sitting together on one side and the other three on the other side. I went to sit down, but Robin got up before I sat down, which put me between her and Estefana, and across from Angelina.

The waitress came over and asked if I needed a menu, but I said I knew what I wanted, and as the girls had their menus, the waitress started taking our orders. Once she had them, she left but was back two minutes later with six Cokes.

"We had fun last night!" Estefana said. "You do that every Friday night?"

"Yes, though cheerleaders usually aren't there during football season because games are on Friday nights."

"A bummer," Robin said. "Could you switch to Saturdays?"

"No, because on alternate Saturdays, I hang out with my dad and his friends and one of my brothers and play poker or pool or whatever. Friday is the best night for everyone except cheerleaders. Sorry."

"We'll only miss nine," Angelina said. "The last game is at the end of November. And if they make the playoffs, those games are on Saturday or Sunday afternoons. And basketball games are usually on Tuesday or Thursday nights."

"Your games are always on Saturday or Sunday, right, Jesse?" Robin asked.

"Yes. Our first game is September 14th at Johnny's Ice House against St. Rita. Then we play against Lane Tech at the rink near their school. Both places are easy to get to via the CTA."

"Cool. I'll ask my mom about coming to the game."

"Me, too!" Estefana added.

The other girls agreed.

"We're always happy to have more people to cheer!" I said. "Especially pretty girls!"

When I said that, I felt Robin press her knee against mine and hold it there, and Ebele smiled at me, her eyes communicating the same message Robin's need conveyed. The only question was what I was going to do about it!

 Steve

"Steve-sama," Yuriko said from the door to my study. "May I enter?"

"Of course."

She came in and shut the door behind her.

"I would like to be with you. I asked Kara-sama, and she gave permission for you to spend the night with me, if you wish. I know you have visitors tomorrow, so I will take it easy on you!"

I smiled, "You prefer gentle."

"As do you! But it has been all summer, and I miss it!"

"Then, after the men leave around midnight, we'll meet in the playroom."

Yuriko laughed softly, "I will be very happy to play with you! May I also bathe you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thank you! I also have a gift for you from Sakurako, which I shall give you in private."

"How is she? Her last letter was at the beginning of the summer."

"She's very happy with her children and runs the compound with advice from her grandmother! Hiro and Yukiko are both growing and are very respectful, dutiful children, even if they are very young."

"And how is Emiko?"

"Very old," Yuriko replied. "But she is healthy, can see quite well, and walks without assistance! I think she might live forever!"

I laughed, "I had that impression! I'm sorry to cut this short, but I need to go to the dojo to teach my class."

"Then I shall let you go! But I shall see you later!"

She left, I shut down my computer, got up, and joined Birgit for the walk to the dojo.

"When will Avanti be back at the dojo?" Birgit asked.

"Next weekend. They took a trip to India because Prajesh's grandfather was very ill. She let Will know."

"Did you get your results from your exams yesterday?"

"Yes. Everything was clear. I'm not going to die just yet!"

"You better not!" Birgit said fiercely.

"I am getting old, though!" I teased.

"Oh, please! You're thirty-nine! That's not old! You're handsome, in great shape, and almost every girl I know wants you!"

"Not quite," I chuckled. "There are plenty who think I'm too old."

"Well, I sure don't think so! And neither do...uh, never mind! Sorry."

"Good catch, Pumpkin."

"How much do you love me?" Birgit asked with a silly smile.

"What is it you want me to do?" I asked warily, but with a smile.

"Make a trade!" Birgit giggled. "Penny said I could ask Terry if you agreed to be with her!"

I laughed, "Interesting tactic for Penny! Getting you to convince me by holding out the possibility you could be with Terry."

"That doesn't bother you, does it?" Birgit asked.

"No. But it's not going to happen, Pumpkin. As much as I love you, that would not be good for Penny, not to mention it would break the rules at NIKA. Sorry."

Birgit giggled, "I knew what your answer would be; I just wanted to see your reaction. I'm pretty sure Penny knew you would refuse."

"I'm positive she did," I said. "Who suggested it?"

"Penny!" Birgit declared.

"Of course she did!" I chuckled. "I will deal with Penelope!"

"Wait! You're not upset are you?"

"No, of course not. But that doesn't mean I won't give Penny grief about it!"

"Can we stop at CVS on the way home?"

"Why?" I asked.

Birgit smirked, "I want to get a personal massager!"

"I'm going to tell you the same thing Håkan Sundström once told me -- there are some things a dad just doesn't need to know!"

 Matthew

"You're playing poker with your dad and his friends tonight, right?" Chelsea asked.

"Yes. Did you speak with Aunt Jennifer about going out with the girls?"

"Yes. The place they're going after dinner allows under twenty-ones, but they have to stay in a segregated area away from where drinks are served. I'll hang out with Suzanne, Natalie, Yuriko, and a few other girls who aren't twenty-one, so it's cool."

"Great! Remember we're staying in a guest room at my dad's house so we don't have to try to get back to the townhouse after midnight."

"I packed a bag! Do we have the guest room with the mirror?"

"Yes! I made sure Dad knew you wanted that one! Just remember, no public displays of affection, even though everyone is cool with us dating."

"I can't wait for you to turn seventeen! Well, I can, obviously, but you know what I mean. So we don't have to hide it!"

"About twenty months," I replied. "But it's not so bad, really. I mean, it's not like we're all over each other in public like some couples!"

"But you start school a week from Monday, which means we'll only see each other on the weekends."

"I know," I replied. "But that's better than how it was before you graduated, and it's better than how it will be when I'm in basic training at RTC!"

"You know I love you and support you, and think the Navy will give you good training, but the big downside is how much you'll be away from me."

There was no way she was going to talk me out of it because there was no way I wanted to go to college. I was already tired of school and I'd only finished one year of High School. The one redeeming thing was Drama, and I was very happy with that, and it made going to school worth it.

"That's still three years away," I said. "Let's worry about it then, OK?"

"OK!"

"Let's head to my dad's house," I said. "Grab your bag!"

 Birgit

After Dad's class, we walked to CVS and Dad stopped when we got to the door.

"Not coming in with me?" I asked with a silly smile.

"Pass," Dad replied. "Get what you need and I'll be waiting here."

I laughed, "Coward!"

"It has nothing to do with being a coward," Dad protested. "And everything to do with things Dads don't need to know or think about!"

"But you *do* think about what it would be like to..."

"Pumpkin," Dad warned.

"And how it would feel if I..."

"Enough!" Dad ordered, but I could tell he wasn't angry. "Go buy your toy!"

I smirked and went into CVS and searched out the aisle with the 'personal massagers' and found they were locked in a case. I found the youngest female clerk and asked her for help.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Old enough to know what it is and how to use it!" I declared. "I have my debit card and more than enough to pay for it. It's not illegal to sell it to me, is it?"

"No," she admitted. "Batteries?"

"I have them at home," I replied.

She went to get the key, then came back and opened the display. She took out a box with a 'personal massager', which was basically a long white tube that was narrow at one end and made to accept batteries at the other end. She walked me to the register where she rang it up. I swiped my debit card, entered the PIN, and the clerk put the box into a red and white CVS bag, put the receipt inside, then handed me the bag. I thanked her and walked out of the store to where Dad was waiting.

"All set!" I declared. "I might need you to show me how to use it!"

"Not a chance, you little scamp!" Dad declared. "Ask Jennifer or Josie! I'd strongly suggest not asking your mom."

"No way I'm doing that!" I declared. "You aren't going to tell her, are you?"

"No. This is a private matter. The only reason I know is because you wanted to tease me about it!"

"Of course I did!" I giggled. "Let's go home!"

We began walking along Hyde Park Avenue, heading for home.

 Jesse

Robin kept her knee pressed against mine for our entire lunch, and Ebele had smiled and used her eyes to convey the same message. When we finished eating, we split the bill, paid, and then left the diner. We walked together until we came to Hyde Park Avenue where Ime and Ebele would turn left while Robin, Estefana, and I would continue straight.

"See you on Friday," Ebele said flashing a huge smile.

"See you then," I replied, hoping she wouldn't be upset about Scarlett. I'd make sure that Angelina explained things so there weren't any misunderstandings either way. Even if nothing happened between Ebele and me, it was important to me not to upset her. She and Ime turned right and Robin, Estefana, Angelina, and I turned left.

"Estefana lives next door to me," Angelina said when we came to 50th Street.
"Robin lives at 47th and Woodlawn."

Angelina hugged me and she and Estefana turned right to walk to Kimbark while Robin and I continued north on Woodlawn until we came to the Compound.

"Want to come in for a bit?" I asked.

"Sure!" Robin said happily.

We walked around the side of the house, and, using the gate in the fence, went to the coach house. I offered Robin a drink, and after I got two Cokes from the fridge, we said 'hi' to my moms, then went downstairs to the Duck's Nest. I put on music, then sat down in one of the beanbag chairs. Robin sat down in another one next to me and moved her knee to touch mine.

I decided to test the waters, and put my hand on her bare leg, just above her knee. Robin set her Coke can on the floor and then moved from her beanbag to sit in my lap with her arms around my neck. I wrapped my arms around her and she moved her lips to mine for a kiss. Her lips parted, and we shared a soft French kiss.

We kissed for about a minute before I felt her hand on my arm. She squeezed, and I immediately understood what she wanted and moved my hand to cup her small, firm breast through her t-shirt. I really wanted to feel it without her t-shirt and bra in the way, but I couldn't let things go further without being sure she was doing this because she wanted to, not because she felt she had to, and I had to make sure she'd had an STI test.

Robin broke the kiss and looked deeply into my eyes.

"Do you want to?" she asked quietly.

"Is that what you want to do? Or is it because of the cheer team?"

"I want to," she said. "I want to do what you and Angelina did when they used have V-cards."

It didn't surprise me that Angelina had told them, and I was positive about the answer I'd receive when I asked the next question.

"Did she tell you about the requirements?" I asked.

Robin nodded, "I had a test, and it's clean. And I went on the Pill before my last period. I want to do it with you. Do you want to do it with me?"

"Yes."

XIII. Limits

August 17, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"We can stay here or go up to my room," I said to Robin.

"Your moms are here," she said quietly.

"That's not a problem. We can stay here or go up to my room."

"They don't care?" Robin asked, surprised.

"They care, but they also allow me to make my own decisions, so long as everyone is tested and we use birth control."

"They let you use your room?"

"Yes. Do you want to go up? Or we can spread blankets here on the floor or on the couch, along with throw pillows."

"Let's go to your room," Robin requested.

She got up, I took her hand, and led her upstairs to the ground floor, then turned the corner and led her up the flight of steps to the top floor, and into my bedroom I shut and locked the door, then put the *Chicago 17* CD into the CD player and pressed 'PLAY'.

"I need to see your test paper," I said.

"Angelina told me that was the case," she said, pulling a folded paper from her pocket.

Her test was clean as I'd expected, so I handed her the paper which she folded and put back into the pocket of her tight white shorts. I held out my arms, and she stepped into them. We wrapped our arms around each other and exchanged a deep French kiss. I broke the kiss and led Robin to the bed; pulled down the duvet, and we lay down next to each other.

We began kissing, and I cupped her tight, firm butt cheek in my right hand and squeezed gently. After a minute, I slid my hand down over her bare leg a few times, then slipped it between her thighs and gently rubbed the seam of her shorts, just below the zipper. Robin moaned softly, and I felt her hand move to my hip, then tentatively slipping down to find my semi-erect dick.

She ran her finger along it a few times, which was enough to make me hard. I moved my hand from between her legs to the waist of her shorts and deftly unsnapped them, then drew down the zipper. I ran my fingertips over her soft cotton shorts, finding a damp spot just below the slight bulge of her mons.

I had on gym shorts, with an elastic waist, and I felt Robin's fingers on my skin as she moved her hand not just into my shorts, but under my briefs as well. She found my dick and ran her fingers along it. In response, I did the only thing I could -- I slipped my hand inside Robin's cotton panties and cupped her mons, my palm resting on her wispy pubic hair with my middle finger between her legs on her damp labia.

I applied gentle pressure to her mons with my palm and gently rubbed her along her labia. Robin curled her finger around my shaft and began gently stroking. A minute later, Robin shuddered and moaned into my mouth, and I felt a small gush of fluids. She was totally ready, even without me licking her, so I broke the

kiss, sat up, and encouraged her to sit up so I could remove her t-shirt and soft cotton bra, and she could remove my t-shirt.

I had her lie back down and moved so I could pull down her shorts and panties, which I tossed aside. I looked over her gorgeous, athletic body, then quickly stripped off my shorts and briefs. I moved on top of Robin and she spread her legs so I could nestle between them.

I grasped my shaft, rubbed the head of my dick along her labia, then held it in position. I lowered my head so we could French kiss, and as our tongues touched, I pushed my hips forward, the head of my dick spreading Robin's labia as I slowly slid into her slick tunnel. She broke the kiss and gasped at the penetration, but we started kissing again right away. She was tight, but plenty wet, so it took only three gentle thrusts to bury myself in her pussy.

Robin wrapped her arms and legs around me, and when I started thrusting, she squirmed under me, and after a dozen thrusts, she wrapped her legs around mine and began moving her hips up and down in rhythm with my thrusts. She broke our kiss, gasping for breath, and moaned softly as I ground against her. A minute later she groaned, her pussy muscles spasmed, and she pushed her hips up hard to increase the pressure on her clit.

Robin had two more orgasms before I had my release, pushing as deeply into her as I could as my cum spurted into her spasming pussy. When our mutual orgasms passed, I carefully pulled out and, wanting a second round, moved down to suckle her small breasts. I sucked each nipple, flicking it with my tongue several times, then began kissing my way down her chest and stomach.

"Jesse?"

"What?" I asked, looking up.

"Don't."

"I want to," I replied. "I like doing it and like how it tastes."

"But it's gross!" she protested.

I wondered if she meant because we'd just screwed or in general, but decided it was better to just stop until we could talk about it. I moved up next to her and gently pulled her to cuddle me. We lay together quietly for a few minutes before I asked my question.

"Why do you think it's gross?" I asked.

"It just is," she replied.

"I don't think so," I said gently. "Girls I've been with think it feels really good and they like when I do it."

"But...uhm, you'd want me to do that to you, and I don't want to."

And there was the crux of the matter. I knew there were girls who didn't like performing oral sex, but for the most part, I hadn't encountered any. Mostly I suspected that was because girls who approached me were ones for whom it was OK, but I'd overheard guys on the hockey team complaining about girls who refused, or who if they did wouldn't let the guy finish in their mouth.

"You don't have to," I said. "And I'd still want to lick you."

"No," Robin said firmly. "I just want to have sex."

"That is part of having sex," I replied, keeping my voice friendly.

"You know what I mean," she protested.

I did, and her definition of sex was limited to intercourse, while mine was much broader, and that told me my best course of action was to screw her a second time if she wanted, then end things.

"Did you want to do it again?" I asked.

"Yes. Just what we did."

"OK," I agreed.

 Birgit

When I arrived home, I went straight up to my room, avoiding my mom so I didn't have to explain. I closed and locked my door and then took the box from the bag. I opened it, looked at the directions and laughed because they didn't say *anything* about what it was so obviously designed to do!

I went to the drawer of my dresser, got two C-cell batteries, put them in the 'personal massager' and flipped the switch, causing it to buzz and vibrate. I tested it on my palm, and then on the outside of my shorts, just over my clit. It felt *good*, so I got into bed, then slipped it into my shorts and panties and put the tip on the hood which covered my button.

I groaned because it felt so good, and it didn't take long before I had an orgasm. It was WAY more effective than my fingers, and I wondered what it would feel like *inside* me. I got out of bed, went to the bathroom to get a tube of K-Y jelly, then undressed and got back into bed.

I spread some lube on the 'personal massager' then very carefully and slowly pressed it between my labia and into my pussy. I groaned louder as the

vibrations gave me pleasure that rivaled Mikael's mouth. I began sliding the hard plastic device in and out, fucking myself with it, imaging it was Mikael screwing me. I came *hard* less than a minute later and decided my 'personal massager' was my new best friend!

I gave myself four more orgasms before I reluctantly stopped. I cleaned the device with some wipes, then got into the shower to wash off the smell of sex, even though it had just been me with my new best friend! Once I was clean, I dried off, dressed, then put the toy in one of my locking desk drawers.

I flattened the box and took it, along with the bag, with me when I went downstairs, once again being careful not to let Mom see me. I went to dad's study, which was empty, and used his heavy-duty crosscut shredder to shred the light cardboard box, then took the bag to the kitchen and put it in the trash. That taken care of, I went to the sunroom and found Matthew and Chelsea there.

"Hi!" I exclaimed. "You guys are early."

"We didn't have anything special to do," Matthew said, "so we came to hang out here. Dad, Aunt Kara, and Suzanne went for a walk with your sisters, and Aunt Jennifer said that Jesse is 'entertaining'."

I laughed, "Probably one of the new cheerleaders!"

"He has a lot of girlfriends!" Chelsea observed.

"He's the star of the hockey team," I declared. "He can get as much pussy as he wants! He's drowning in it!"

Matthew laughed and Chelsea rolled her eyes.

"Jesse is living out my friend Nick's fantasy!"

"He's the one who thinks every girl should sleep with him, but none of them will because he thinks that, right?" I asked.

"Yep!" Matthew declared. "It's pathetic and funny at the same time."

"Did you want to hang out with us?" Chelsea asked.

"Sure!" I agreed.

 Steve

When we returned from our walk, my sister and her kids had arrived, and she asked to speak to me privately. Joel went to get himself a beer from the fridge and Stephanie and I went to my study.

"What's up, Squirt?"

"An idea I want to run past you. I know you're out of the management loop, but you're still my best advisor."

"Go on," I prompted.

"I want to create two positions, though I'm not sure what to call them just yet, but they would, in effect, be consultants. One would be an attorney and one a doctor, and they'd advise the Board of Directors, Julia, and Cindi, on future NIKA offerings in the legal and medical fields."

"We can't do that through the user group?" I asked.

"First, we want to keep that independent. I think that was the most important thing Ben Jackson did. Second, I want to give them titles, positions, and stipends, and find two individuals who are well-known and respected."

"For the propaganda value," I replied.

"PR, you idiot!" Stephanie said mirthfully.

"Same difference," I chuckled. "At least to this 'dumb boy'! Did you have anyone in mind?"

"Doctor Malik Washington would be perfect, if he'd do it. "On the law side, I'd like Megan Burch, but she'd have to recuse herself from User Group activities."

"Did I tell you that story?"

"First grade when we lived in Bermuda Dunes, right?"

"Yes. It would have been the year you were born. Let's just say she's FAR more attractive now than in first grade!"

"I'd say 'duh' but it's too obvious to even say that!" Stephanie replied. "What do you think?"

"I think it's an interesting idea. Did you speak to Cindi about it?"

"Yes. She likes the idea, though she didn't have good titles, either."

"Just off the top of my head, something like 'Senior Legal Advisor' or 'Senior Legal Consultant'. I'm not sure either of those is right, but along those lines."

"That's what I was thinking, but I haven't hit on the exact right phrase."

"I'll back the proposal if anyone asks," I replied. "But I don't expect anyone to ask."

"Dad will. He'll call you because that's what he does!"

"Possibly, but he's confident in your ability to lead NIKA. And I'll remind him if he does call. I'll see him in October when I go down for the grand opening of the Marble Palace."

"An interesting investment, given what I know about Anthony and Connie."

"The hotel is one-hundred percent legit," I replied. "Whatever else they're doing, it's separate, and is its own LLC. Everything is above board and on the books, including an annual audit performed by someone I nominate."

"Which tells me their *other* businesses aren't fully legit."

"If they are offering to the public the goods and services that the public wants, but which are denied to them by their government, who am I to object?"

"I'm sure you've ensured you're protected if something bad happens."

"I do know a few attorneys," I chuckled. "The biggest risk is to the capital I invested, but the dividends are payable quarterly, and I think it's worth the tiny risk. Anthony has already sold out his bookings for three months, and the hotel hasn't even opened yet! Anyway, please let me know what you decide about titles."

"I'll run those by you before I make a final decision."

"As you wish."

Stephanie smiled, "I love you, too!"

 Birgit

"Aunt Elyse, can I talk to you for a few minutes before you go out with the girls?"
I asked.

"We have about fifteen minutes, so yes. Privately?"

"Yes. We can use dad's study. I checked with him."

Aunt Elyse and I went into the study and I shut the door. We sat down side-by-side in two wingback chairs.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"I asked Katy about sex toys and she suggested I speak to you."

Aunt Elyse smiled, "Is this your idea or a boy's?"

"Mine. Is that important?"

"Yes. Katy knows the story of what happened with my first boyfriend when I was fourteen, and I suspect that's why she sent you to discuss it with me."

"Will you tell me?" I asked.

"I had just turned fourteen and one of my friends had an older brother I thought was cute. His name was Sean, and he had graduated from Live Oaks, which is a vocational school in Clermont County, Ohio, where your dad and I both lived.

He worked in an auto shop in Glen Este, and one day after school, at my friend's house, I began flirting with him because I thought he was a hunk."

"How old was he?"

"Nineteen," Aunt Elyse replied. "Inside of five minutes, he kissed me, and when we left my friend's house, we went to his apartment. We started making out, and I got super excited. I let him touch my boobs, and then he rubbed his finger between my legs. It felt like I was going to explode, and at that point, I was willing to let him do whatever he wanted. He fucked me and I came hard again, so when he asked for a blowjob I did it and then he used his mouth on me and I got so excited I didn't object when he put his dick in my butt. He didn't force me, he just had me so excited that I would do anything."

I giggled, "So, like me with Mikael Westberg!"

Aunt Elyse laughed, "Why am I not surprised? Your dad had Katt, and Mikael had you! Was that your first?"

"No. That was Kjell. Dad and my moms don't know about Mikael, and I want to keep it that way, please."

"Of course! Are those your only two lovers so far?"

"No! I was actually with a girl before I was with Kjell and Peter Kallas after I came back from Sweden."

"Then you've done something I never have and never would!"

"Have sex with Peter?" I teased, knowing what she meant.

"No, you goofball! You know I meant girls. I had plenty of opportunity living with your dad, but I was never interested. Anyway, back to my story about Sean. I saw him every chance I had, and he did all that stuff over and over again. Then he started buying me toys and eventually ropes and a blindfold. I didn't care because the orgasms were crushing. Not long after I turned fifteen, I went to his apartment to see him and he had a girl with him who I knew, and who had just finished 7th grade. I left and never went back and he never called me or talked to me again."

"She was thirteen, right?"

"Yes. Anyway, the point about the toys was it was overwhelming, and I developed a real fetish for them. And I wanted to use them on him, but he always refused, which I think was part of his way of controlling me and fulfilling his fantasies. I did eventually get a chance to use them."

"Dad!" I giggled.

"No comment!" Aunt Elyse declared, confirming my suspicion.

"I guess I don't get why Katy is concerned."

"Because you're awfully young. I'm not saying you're too young to have sex, and unlike me, you planned it. May I ask specifically what you wanted?"

"Well, I went to speak to Penny, who sent me to Katy when I mentioned a harness."

Aunt Elyse laughed and shook her head.

"If you are thinking of using that with Peter, you *have* to talk to him about it and not make any threats or place any conditions. But even then, I'd suggest a fourteen-year-old boy isn't ready for something like that."

"Why?" I asked. "I mean, it's just sex!"

"It's never 'just sex'," Aunt Elyse replied. "And I mean, it's not just physical, but psychological and emotional. Let me ask you this -- did you feel the same way after you were with Kjell as you did when you were with the girl?"

"No," I replied.

"Because you regretted it?"

"No way! It was fun and felt good, but I like boys! I might be with a girl again, and might have a threesome where I do stuff with a guy and girl, but I totally prefer boys."

"Just be careful, Birgit," Aunt Elyse said. "Sex affects everyone in different ways, and you want to do your best to make sure you're not pushing someone into something they don't really want to do."

"So, what do you think?"

"Can you be mature and responsible?"

"You know I am!" I declared.

"Usually, but you're also impetuous and precocious! I'll get you what you need, but on one condition."

"What?"

"I tell your dad before I do it."

"What?! Isn't it up to me?"

"It is. Feel free to acquire them yourself."

"I can't," I fumed. "There is no way I could go into a store that sells them!"

"I guarantee anyone who you ask to help you will insist they tell your dad."

"Ugh!" I groaned. "May I think about it?"

"Of course. You know how to get in touch with me."

I nodded and got up, so Aunt Elyse got up, too. We left the study and I let Mom know I was going to Lilibeth's house to meet my friends.

 Jesse

After Robin and I had our second time, we got out of bed. I suggested a shower, and she agreed, but wasn't willing to walk across the hall naked. I lent her a robe, and we went to the bathroom. I closed and locked the door, then adjusted the shower spray. We got in and I began washing Robin.

"That feels nice," she said as I soaped her body.

She did the same for me, and once we finished, we dried each other, she put on the robe, and we went back to the bedroom to dress. Once we dressed, we went downstairs, and I offered to walk her home, as I had time to do that before Guys' Night. She agreed, so we left the house, walked through the yard and out the gate and onto the sidewalk, which ran along Woodlawn Avenue.

I wasn't quite sure what to say to Robin because we had different views on what sex was, and even though I'd enjoyed screwing, I wasn't really interested in being with her again. I wondered where she had received her information about sex.

"Have you ever read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*?" I asked.

"No," Robin replied. "What's it about?"

"It's a sex education book written by my dad's friend. It's probably the best one ever written."

"Why do I need to read it?" she asked. "I obviously know how to do it!"

"It has really good information and all my friends have read it."

"Did I do anything wrong?"

"No," I replied, deciding not to bring up oral sex.

"Is it because I said kissing there was gross?"

It was, and now she'd brought up the issue, so I felt it was OK to discuss it.

"Yes."

"If that's what you want, I'm not interested!" she declared. "It's totally gross!"

I realized I wouldn't convince her, and the fact that she wouldn't even read Bethany's book was enough to make me not want to be with her again. She was a nice enough girl, but too limited in her view of sex. That was her decision, of

course, but that meant if she wanted to do it again, it would have to be with someone other than me.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, and when we got to her house, she said 'goodbye' and went into the house. I turned for home so I could play in the poker tournament.

 Birgit

"You're early!" Lilibeth exclaimed when she opened the door to her house.

"I know. I wanted to talk to my BFF!"

"Come in. We can go up to my room until everyone else gets here."

We went up to her room, and she shut the door and put on *Cheap Trick* by the group of the same name.

"We could talk in bed, if you want!" Lilibeth offered.

"What about your parents?" I asked.

"They aren't suspicious of me having girls in my room!"

"It seems risky unless you want to come out to them."

"I don't, and you're right. I was teasing, though, because I know how you feel."

"Soft, sexy, and tasty!" I giggled.

Lilibeth laughed, "So true! But I know you prefer guys."

"I'm going to have a threesome with Peter and another girl in a month!"

"And you'll do stuff with her?"

"Yes."

"But not me?" Lilibeth asked, sounding disappointed, or maybe even hurt.

"I'd way rather the threesome included you, but you don't like guys."

"I don't, and I wouldn't, but if you're OK with doing stuff with her, why not me?"

"I am OK with doing stuff with you," I protested. "It's just not my preference. But in a threesome, it's different."

Lilibeth pouted, "So to get to be with you again, I have to let a boy put his dick in me?"

I realized I'd made a huge mistake in telling Lilibeth about the threesome. I wanted to share everything with her, but I'd hurt her feelings by saying I'd do stuff with Julie when we were together with Peter. I needed to fix things with her, if I could.

"I was insensitive," I said. "I'm really sorry. We promised to share everything, but I didn't consider how it might sound to you."

Lilibeth smiled, "And I shouldn't have reacted badly."

"Kiss and make up?" I offered.

"Do I get to choose where?" Lilibeth asked with a smirk.

I laughed, "Not this time."

"Bummer!"

We hugged and kissed each other on the cheek and then I told her about the 'personal massager'.

"You put it inside, though, right?"

"Yes! It felt SO good!"

"But it worked on the outside, right?"

"Yes. You really wouldn't put anything in there? Not even a vibrator or dildo?"

"I just don't like the idea of anything going in there; I don't know why."

"My tongue?"

"That's the limit."

"Why?"

Lilibeth shrugged, "I don't know. It's just how I feel."

I remembered reading something in Aunt Bethany's other book and wondered if something had happened to Lilibeth. I didn't think it was smart to ask her just before our friends arrived, because I didn't want to upset her.

"Everyone is different," I said. "Still BFFs?"

"Yes!"

The doorbell rang, which meant more of our friends had arrived, so we left Lilibeth's room and went downstairs to greet them.

 Steve

"Your bet, Ducky!" I said, staring across the table at him.

"Your powers of intimidation are useless against me!" Jesse declared, staring back. "\$1000."

I looked at the board, which, following the 'Turn', showed three hearts, K-J-9, and the K of diamonds. I had J-J, and the only possible hand that Jesse could have that would be ahead right now would be either a pair of kings or specifically the 10 and Q of hearts. If the 'River' was a K or 9, and he held either a K, or more likely, a pair of 9s, he could beat me.

I was convinced he didn't have the straight flush, so it was a question of what cards he was holding. Based on what I knew, and how he had played so far during the evening, my money was on 9-9. My dilemma was to push him all-in, in which case he might fold, or make a modest raise and see if he came back over the top. The odds were in my favor, but there was always a risk of the fourth 9.

"\$5000," I said.

Jesse cocked his head and stared at me, and smirked, picked up an Oreo, and twisted it.

"Dad thinks he's funny imitating 'Teddy KGB'," Jesse said. "But I'd like to see him actually eat that Oreo!"

"That's enough carbs to put him off his game," Doctor Myles Baker, PGY2 Resident, and Sarah York's boyfriend, said.

"All in," Jesse declared.

Call," I said immediately.

"Show 'em," Kurt, who was dealing the hand, said.

"Wait!" Terry exclaimed. "Steve, turn yours, but then tell me what you think Jesse has."

I flipped over my J-J, and Jesse groaned.

"Jesse has 9-9," I said.

"Fucking penguins!" Jesse growled, turning over his 9-9.

"Let's see if Jesse gets the one out," I said. "River, please."

Kurt burned a card and turned over the unnecessary but delicious fourth J.

"Insult to injury!" Jesse growled.

"Steve wins," Kurt said.

"No shit," Jesse declared. "Congrats, Dad."

"Thanks!" I replied..

"Next time, I'm feeding Steve a box of Oreos before the tourney," Karl declared.

"Over my dead body!" Al Barton retorted.

"Something has to be done!" Karl declared. "He's just uncanny with his reads!"

I smirked, "*A strange game. The only winning move is not to play. How about a nice game of chess?*"

Everyone laughed.

"Steve, will you sit out next time?" Dave asked. "You've done that in the past."

"I will," I replied.

"Then collect your winnings and let's go have a glass of bourbon!"

We did, and spent the rest of the evening with some men playing pool, some playing a cash Hold 'em game, and others simply enjoying each other's company. Just after midnight, after the women had returned and all our friends had gone home, I led Yuriko to the room off the kitchen we called the 'playroom', where she lovingly bathed me. After the bath, we went to the bedroom and Yuriko spent the next two hours making love to me.

August 18, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Thank you for allowing me to pleasure you last night!" Yuriko said when I got out of bed to take a quick shower.

"You're welcome, Yuriko-chan! I very much enjoyed it."

Yuriko stayed in bed, and after my shower, I kissed her, then left the playroom to join Jessica, Kara, and Suzanne to walk to the hospital. Jessica had arranged to speak to the head of neuro on Monday, and he'd promised to review the findings from Mayo. I'd spoken briefly with Al the previous evening, and he was confident Doctor Klein would allay Jessica's fears.

When Kara, Suzanne, and I returned from the hospital, I went to the sunroom where Birgit was waiting for me. I got in the chaise and she climbed in next to me so we could cuddle.

"It works!" she giggled.

"Pumpkin," Dad warned, "we spoke about this."

"I like teasing you, Dad!"

"Oh, I know!" Dad chuckled. "Just don't take it too far, please."

"May I ask your opinion on something?"

"Always."

"It's on that subject."

"Then I may send you to Katy."

"I IM'd with Katy and she had me speak to Aunt Elyse who said I should think about it, but that she'd have to tell you."

"I'm not sure I even want to know!" I said.

"I asked about something in Aunt Bethany's book."

"Go on," I said warily.

"Besides the 'personal massager', I wanted to get some toys."

I didn't think that was a good idea, at least at Birgit's age, but truth be told, she was as mature as any eighteen-year-old I knew. And more importantly, if she wanted what I suspected she wanted, I was positive it was a bad idea, at least with respect to Pater Kallas, who was also only fourteen.

"The book was vague," I said.

"I did some research," Birgit replied.

That came as no surprise, and confirmed, at least in my mind, my assumption about what she wanted.

"I know you're a mature young woman," I said, "but you're a bit young for that."

"Argh!" Birgit groused. "You, Aunt Elyse, Katy, and Penny!"

"Penny?"

"I asked her first because I can't buy what I want. She said to speak to Katy, and if Katy agreed, Penny would get them. I IM'd with Katy, like I said, and she told me I had to speak with Aunt Elyse. And Aunt Elyse told me to think about it, and if I still wanted them, she'd buy them for me, but only after she told you! Why are they being so difficult?!"

"May I stick my nose into something I normally wouldn't?"

"I'd prefer your tongue!" Birgit giggled, then said, "Sorry. Yes."

"You are absolutely your mother's daughter!" I declared. "You have to consider your partner and how they might react even to the suggestion. That could end very badly, and the last thing you or I need is Dave Kallas at our front door. Or are you thinking of a female lover?"

"Been there, done that!" Birgit declared mirthfully. "Even before Kjell!"

I was not at all surprised by that, but it was another one of those things I didn't really need to know about.

"I assume that Elyse talked to you about Sean?"

"Yes, but this isn't like that. Nobody is pressuring me or getting me overly excited or anything. This is me being curious."

"You have to decide for you, Pumpkin, but please think it through, and please consider how Peter, or other High School boys, might react."

"How would you have reacted?"

"That's one of those things in the 'off limits' category," I said. "At least between you and me. Ask Jennifer."

Birgit giggled, "Not Aunt Melanie?"

"Jennifer," I said. "And she's free to tell you anything she feels appropriate."

"Interesting!" Birgit declared.

"Breakfast is ready, Steve-sama and Birgit-chan!" Yuriko said from the door to the sunroom.

"Thank you," I replied. "We'll be there in three minutes."

Yuriko left and Birgit and I cuddled quietly for three minutes before heading to the kitchen for breakfast.

 Birgit

"Hi," I said when Aunt Jennifer opened the door to the coach house.

"Jesse is at church."

"I know. I wanted to chat with you, if it's OK."

"Come in."

She let me into the coach house, offered me some tea, and after she let Aunt Josie know we were going to chat, we sat down at the kitchen table.

"I have two questions," I said. "First, in Bethany's book, it mentions toys, and I did some research and wanted to get some."

"You're a bit young for that, I think," Aunt Jennifer said.

"It's fucking unanimous," I grouched. "You, Penny, Katy, Aunt Elyse, and Dad!"

"That ought to tell you something. Let me guess, your dad left it up to you, right?"

"Yes. So did Aunt Elyse. Penny told me to discuss it with Katy and Katy told me to discuss it with Aunt Elyse, who told me about her first boyfriend. Dad's concern was about my partner."

"I'm going to guess you're sexually active?"

"Very!" I giggled.

Aunt Jennifer laughed, then said, "Why am I not surprised?"

"Because you're smart!" I declared. "Dad said I should ask you about how he reacted. He said you could tell me anything you felt was appropriate."

"Reacted to what?"

"The idea of being pegged."

Aunt Jennifer rolled her eyes, "You have to be the only fourteen-year-old girl on the planet who could casually discuss that about her dad without blushing, and most wouldn't even know that word!"

"I'm my mother's daughter, as Dad says!"

"And your dad's, but you are subject to a very different parenting style than your mom and dad had growing up. Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes. And please do not worry about me and Dad. I know the rules and the limits."

"And you accept them?"

"Grudgingly, but yes."

"I'm glad you're honest about that. Your dad is very submissive, at least with regard to what we're talking about. Well, and to anything you want!"

"Almost anything," I replied.

"Yes, of course, but you admitted there are limits, and we don't need to bring them up. That's your dad's nature in that regard, and, to be honest, Melanie and I took advantage of that personality trait. He did a lot of things he didn't particularly care for to make us happy and to please us physically. That's actually what you want in a lover, but you have to be very careful not to abuse him or her."

"So you mean like Yuriko?" I asked.

"I think the better example is Anala, at least with regard to sex. You might speak with her once she and her family return from India. But Yuriko would be a good choice as well."

"I'm spoken some to her, and she has a very different view on relationships."

"Yes, she does! Outwardly, she's demure, deferential, and submissive. Inwardly, she's strong and in complete control. I'm sure you've heard about who actually runs the compound in Japan."

"«Shihan» Hideki's wife! Just like here!"

Aunt Jennifer nodded, "Your dad has always let his closest girls run his life."

"Mostly," I replied.

"Birgit, drop that, please. At some point, you're going to say something at the wrong time, and it's going to get everyone in hot water, even though it never happened."

"Sorry," I said. "But Dad did some of those things?"

Aunt Jennifer nodded, "He did, reluctantly. I'm not sure what Melanie and I did was wise, but hindsight is 20/20. If you want my advice, and I suspect you do because you're here, wait. And make sure you discuss it with your partner when you're fully clothed and not overheated. People make bad decisions in situations such as that."

"Aunt Elyse."

"If she told you about Sean, then you know. That happened to your dad once, and it's why he's so adamant about positive consent."

"Acquiescence is not consent," I said.

"Exactly. That's an important lesson to learn, and the sooner you learn it, the better. That's especially true for someone like you who I suspect is an exciting partner."

"Duh!" I giggled.

Jennifer laughed and rolled her eyes.

"And modest, too!"

"What does Dad say? It's not arrogant if you can back it up!"

"Your dad might be slightly mistaken on that, but he does say it. What was your other question?"

"I have a friend who is lesbian, and doesn't want to be penetrated, even by a vibrator. I totally don't understand and think something might have happened to her."

Jennifer was quiet for a moment, then said, "It's possible. May I pry?"

"I experimented with a girl," I said. "It was interesting, fun, and felt good, but I prefer boys by miles and miles."

Jennifer smiled, "Girl first or boy first?"

"Girl. Why?"

"Just curious. I want to tell you something that very few people know, and which you absolutely have to keep a secret. Your dad knows, but you cannot speak to him about it or even let on you know."

"Why?"

"Because of his reaction when I told him about it."

"I promise," I said, wondering what it might be.

"You probably don't know, but I have a severe aversion to being penetrated, and that stems from me being raped when I was fourteen."

"Whoa!" I gasped. "But..."

"Yes," Aunt Jennifer interrupted, "your dad and I were lovers, and as much as I loved him, and as good as it made me feel, it also always felt wrong. I didn't tell him that, but he knew there was something wrong all along. He thought it was

my interest in girls, and it's true I struggled with that, but it was the fact I was raped by a teacher."

"Holy shit!" I gasped. "Did he go to jail?"

"No. As I said, very few people know, and your dad was the first person I ever told. That was when I visited after Bethany had her accident."

"Dad wanted to kill him, didn't he?"

"He did. I talked him out of it."

"You think my friend might have been raped?"

"It's possible. It's also possible she was abused in some other way. And, of course, it's possible that's just who she is. All you can do is to be her friend and wait to see if she'll open up. Is this someone you might be with again?"

"Maybe," I replied. "I'm not sure."

"Well, I know it's not bigotry or being grossed out," Jennifer said.

"It's not," I replied. "I liked it, I just strongly prefer boys!"

"Everyone has their quirks!" Aunt Jennifer teased.

I laughed, "You're too funny! Thanks for talking to me."

"You're welcome!"

XIV. I'm Tendering My Resignation

August 18, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Good morning!" I said to Kristin and Erika when they arrived just after 10:00am on Sunday.

"We're here to fuck you within a millimeter of your life!" Kristin declared. "Are you ready?"

I laughed, grabbed their hands, and led them both to the playroom, closing and locking the door to the kitchen behind us. When we went into the bedroom, and I couldn't help but laugh, as square in the middle of the bed was my bag of toys.

"I'm all yours," I said. "For the next eight hours, I'll do anything you want."

"You're sure about that?" Kristin asked with a smirk.

"Positive," I replied.

"Then get undressed and we'll give you a joint blowjob!"

They didn't need to ask twice, and I quickly stripped naked. The girls removed their outer clothing, revealing sexy underwear -- green for Kristin to match her eyes, and white lace for Erika, contrasting with her deeply tanned skin. Kristin moved the bag off the bed to the desk, and the girls had me get into the bed. They got in on either side of me, their heads by my groin and theirs by my head.

I watched in the mirror as they began kissing and licking me, and I quickly grew hard.

Kristin and Erika took turns taking me into their mouths, with one girl running her tongue along my shaft, while the other one sucked me and ran her tongue around my glans. The vision in the mirror was so exciting, I had to carefully regulate my breathing and do my best to relax so as not to cum too soon.

The girls had other ideas, and their efforts overcame my resistance, causing me to groan and for cum to spurt into Kristin's mouth. She took the first two spurts, and the girls quickly switched, the third spurt hitting both of them on the lips as Erika took me into her mouth to receive the final spurts.

After the final spurt, the girls French kissed each other, then French kissed me, neither having swallowed. After the deep French kisses with me, they kissed each other once again. I wondered just how far they would go in that regard, but not expecting it to go beyond kissing. They got out of bed, removed their bras and panties, then hugged tightly and exchanged a deep French kiss, then turned to face me.

"Anything, right?" Kristin asked.

"Yes," I agreed.

"Then I'm going to peg you while you fuck Erika. Once she cums, then we'll switch places. I know you can last a long time, so we'll switch back and forth until you can't hold back."

"Promise you'll use the smallest dildo, please."

"Not what Kara calls 'King Kong'?" Kristin smirked.

"I'll deal with Kara later!" I exclaimed. "I'll do what you want."

"Yes!" both girls declared excitedly.

 Jesse

I left church as soon as the Divine Liturgy ended and headed to Midway Airport to meet Scarlett's flight. I arrived about ten minutes before the flight was scheduled to land, but when I walked into the arrival hall, the board showed that the plane was going to be at least twenty minutes late.

I sat down with *Artemis Fowl*, put in my earbuds for my iPod, and read and listened to music until the flight showed it was at the gate, which was nearly thirty minutes later. I got up and walked over to the security doors to wait for Scarlett and, about ten minutes later, she came through the door, rushed over to me and hugged me.

"Hi, Jesse!" she exclaimed.

"Hi, Scarlett! How was your flight?"

"We had to circle for twenty minutes because of 'traffic'."

"Did you check a bag?" I asked.

"Yes."

I took her carry-on bag from her, then took her hand and we walked to the correct baggage claim. After a ten-minute wait, she pointed to her duffel bag. I grabbed it, and we headed out to Dad's BMW.

"What are we doing this week?" she asked as I pulled out of the parking lot.

"Whatever you want," I replied. "The only specific plans I have are for us to go out with my friends on Friday night. Well, I have hockey practice every morning, but you knew that."

"Yes, and I'll come watch your practice."

"Just so you know, I give my friend Nicholas a ride to and from the rink."

"What grade?"

"Freshman, but he started school a year early, so he's only thirteen."

"What position?"

"Right wing. He's on the third O-line."

"As a Freshman? And a year younger? He must be good."

"He is. We have a good shot at winning the citywide championship again, which we did when I was a Freshman."

"You were the starting goalie, right?"

"Yes. Before I forget, are you OK with having dinner with our extended family tonight?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I always like to ask rather than just expect someone to do something."

"That sounds familiar!"

"I promise not to resist!"

Scarlett laughed, "I'd ask 'what guy would?', but I remember our conversations when you were at hockey camp."

"Just to be typically me, you're welcome to sleep in a guest room in the main house, if you prefer."

"Seriously? I *want* to sleep in the same bed with you!"

"Yes, and I was reasonably sure that was the case, but you know, I never assume."

"I expect to be completely and totally fucked by next Sunday!"

"I will endeavor to fulfill your expectations!"

 Birgit

"I'm sorry about yesterday," I said to Lilibeth as we walked from her house to get ice cream.

"It's OK, Birgit," Lilibeth said. "I was overly sensitive."

"And I was insensitive."

"Want to make it up to me?" Lilibeth asked with a silly smile.

"And just what did you have in mind?"

"Orgasms! Lots of orgasms!"

It had been fun, and she'd made me feel really good, but it wasn't something I wanted to do regularly. It was, I thought, kind of like Katy and my dad. Katy was only with Amy, except for the two or three days when my dad visited. That would be OK, in reverse, along with threesomes, but I was pretty sure those wouldn't happen too often. Well, I could probably find two guys who would do it with me at the same time, which was something I considered, but wasn't sure about.

"You remember I prefer guys, right?" I asked.

"Yes, but you said you liked it and that I made you cum hard!"

"Sure, but it's not something I want to do regularly," I replied. "Did you know that Libby and her girlfriend broke up?"

"No. When?"

"Jesse said Libby's girlfriend texted her while she was on vacation in California and said she met someone."

"By text message? That's lower than low!"

"I agree. I'd say Karli should rot in hell for that, if I believed in hell! But karma is a bitch!"

"And you think she might be interested in me?"

"You're totally hot, and only a year younger than she is. You should talk to her and see if she's interested."

"She's bi, right?"

"Yes, and her long-term goal is a situation similar to my dad's, except with a guy and a girl."

"No thanks!" Lilibeth declared.

"She and Karli were exclusive," I replied. "She and Jesse were together for a while, but Libby decided she wanted to be with Karli."

"I'll call her tomorrow and see if she wants to get together."

"Cool!"

"Thanks, BFF!"

I grabbed Lilibeth's hand, and we held hands the rest of the way to the ice cream shop.

 Steve

"There's one last thing," Kristin said late on Sunday afternoon. "Well, two, technically."

We had done what they'd wanted, with the girls taking turns pegging me while I fucked the other girl, then they'd alternated riding me and sitting on my face, with me cumming a total of five times, including the blowjob.

"Should I be afraid?" I asked with a silly grin.

Kristin and Erika both laughed.

"No," Kristin replied. "I want you to make slow, passionate love to me for as long as you can, then I want you to shave me."

"NO WAY!" I protested. "I am NOT repeating your dad's crime against humanity!"

"Steve," Kristin said with a soft smile, "you'd be the only guy to ever see me with pubic hair, and the only one who will ever make love to me with pubic hair. It would be something special between you and me, and nobody else, ever."

"That's an interesting point," I replied. "Let's make love and I'll think about it."

"Steve, you should do it," Erika said firmly. "Imagine that even Kristin's eventual husband won't ever see her pubic hair. She's telling you how special you are to her."

Erika had a good point, and as much as I objected to her removing Kristin's shocking red pubic hair, it was a sign of affection, and a permanent one from the way Kristin was saying.

"You're right, and I'm an idiot!" I replied. "Kristin, Let's make love and then I'll shave you, as you requested."

She smiled, climbed into bed and I spent the next thirty minutes tenderly making love to her, savoring the pleasure, and regretting that it would be the last time I'd be with her. My sixth orgasm of the day was the best, not because it was the most intense, but because it was from making love with Kristin.

When we finished, Erika produced a pair of scissors, a razor, and shaving cream from a bag Kristin had brought with her, and then got a damp washcloth for me. I carefully trimmed away most of Kristin's pubic hair, then used the shaving cream and razor to remove the remaining hair, leaving her with a perfectly

smooth mons. I wiped her clean with the damp washcloth, then planted several kisses on her bare mons.

"Thank you," Kristin said.

Erika passed her something, which she then handed to me, saying, "Remember!"

I accepted the small vial, which had some of Kristin's pubic hair inside.

"Thank you," I said.

Kristin smiled, "You're welcome. And thank you for being a wonderful lover."

"Shall we shower?" Erika asked. "Kristin's mom will be here soon to pick us up."

The three of us went to the shower where the two girls lovingly washed my body, and then I did the same for both of them -- Erika first, then Kristin. When I finished washing Kristin, I took her in my arms and held her sexy young body against mine for several minutes before we got out of the shower.

We dried each other, then I dried Erika, and the three of us dressed. The girls helped me change the sheets on the bed, and then we went to my study to wait for Kathy to arrive, which she did about fifteen minutes later.

 Jesse

"Your family is totally cool!" Scarlett said as we walked back to the coach house late on Sunday evening.

"I have no complaints! Well, except that my dad beat me at poker last night!"

"You play poker with your dad?"

"With him and his friends. I told you about Guys' Night and Girls' Night Out. The poker tournament was at Guy's Night. He's the only one who can consistently beat me."

"You're that good?"

"Yes, but he's better. Last night he knew the cards I held before I showed them."

"He's cheating somehow!"

I shook my head, "No, I can do that, too, just not as well as he can. My uncle Terry is about as good as I am, and two of the Navy guys are close. But Dad is just uncanny."

"But how can you know?" Scarlett asked as we walked into the coach house.

"By the way people bet, by the cards face up on the table, and knowing how someone plays. Some people have a 'tell', which is some kind of reaction, like how they hold their cards or hold their head or the expressions they make or the way they fondle their chips or even the pulse in their neck."

"Do you have that?"

I shook my head, "No. Neither does Dad. We're both completely stoic."

"It's just for fun, though, right?" Scarlett asked as we climbed the stairs to my room.

"Oh, hell no!" I declared. "NO game is ever 'just for fun' in our family. All games, from *Sorry* to Texas Hold 'em, are blood sport! And we play poker for money at Guys' Night. Everyone kicks in \$40, with the winner taking half, second place

taking twenty-five percent, third place taking fifteen percent, and fourth place taking ten percent."

"How many people play?"

"Usually around 25," I replied.

"So you won \$250?!"

"A little more than that, but Dad won over \$500!"

"You don't work, right?"

"Correct. I get a larger allowance from my moms and dad so I can focus on hockey. They made an exception for me paying for my insurance, too."

"But your siblings will have to work?"

"Unless they are involved in something that doesn't allow it, yes, they will. My moms and dad don't believe everyone has to have the same things for it to be just or equitable."

"You're so funny that you won't use 'fair' even when it's not whining!"

I laughed, "The only banned word in my dad's house is 'fair'. I can say 'fuck you' to him and he won't be upset. My sisters can use whatever words they want at home, including what most people would call 'profanity' and not get in trouble. But the 'F' word is totally unacceptable because it's almost always about whining."

"Think about my situation with an allowance, and not having to work. My siblings receive an allowance as well, and it's based on age and need, not anything else. When they work, it might or might not be adjusted to suit their

specific circumstances. We're all part of the family, and we share everything, which includes income. My moms pay rent for this coach house, for example."

"Your family is so different from mine! Or any other one I've ever come across. Your parents don't even try to control your life!"

"Dad figured out, a long time ago, that it's impossible to prevent teenagers from doing what they want to do, so he decided to ensure we had a good education, understood how to decide right from wrong, knew the relationship between privileges and responsibilities, and ensured we had access to all the information we needed to be successful. And he treated us as if we were rational, thinking, independent individuals from the time we were toddlers."

"And that's how you plan to raise your kids, right?"

"Absolutely! But talk to me in about ten years about kids! I need to finish High School and college, and get settled in a job! Oh, and find the woman with whom I want to spend the rest of my life!"

"Are you taking applications?" Scarlett asked with a smile.

"Your application was filed when we spoke on the bench in Minneapolis!"

"Not when we went to bed?"

"No. Sex was a sign of a bond that had formed; it didn't form the bond. Think about how much we talked before that."

"True. Can we stop talking and go to bed now?"

"Yes!"

August 19, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve, Sam Soleymani is here to see you," Kimmy said over the intercom.

"Send her in, please."

Sam came into my office a few second later in stocking feet, having removed her shoes due to the «tatami» flooring in my office.

"Hi, Steve!"

"Hi, Sam. What's up?"

"Do you have a few minutes for me?"

"Of course. Penny, go forage for something to give you a sugar high in the Annex, please."

Penny laughed, "Today is Krispy Kreme! Hopefully there are some left. I had two already!"

"I'll have Jess or Sofia write the insulin prescription for you!" I chuckled.

As Penny left, she slid the «fusuma» closed to give Sam and I some privacy. Sam and I went to the low table and sat on «zafu».

"It's your dime," I replied.

"Pay phones are fifty cents, and they're going to disappear inside of about ten years, as more and more people have mobile phones."

"True."

"I'm tendering my resignation," Sam said.

I frowned, "First, that's something for my sister or Julia, not me, but I have to ask..."

"Levi and I have more than enough money for retirement, especially with the expected growth in our portfolios. We're going to spend three months in Europe using Eurail Passes to visit literally every country in Europe, including Liechtenstein, Andorra, Monaco, and San Marino."

"Former East Bloc as well?"

"Yes. Continental Europe and all four countries on the British Isles; well five, with Northern Ireland. We'll stop in Iceland on the way over. After that, we're going to China, though I'm not sure how long we'll stay there. When we come back, we're going to volunteer with a global aid group, most likely in Africa."

"Why now?"

"I just had my forty-first birthday and Levi his forty-fifth. It is, as they say, now or never. I hope to be super-active in my sixties and seventies, but you know we can't count on that."

"Does anyone else know?"

Sam shook her head, "You're first. I know you're mostly out of the management loop, but you hired me, it's your company, and I felt you needed to know. Not going to try to talk me out of it?"

"Is that my style?"

"No, it's not. You support everyone in achieving their goals to the best of your ability and resources. That's a good thing, by the way. I only asked out of curiosity."

"Would I go to bat for you for more money or a different role or whatever? Of course. But you came in and said you were resigning, not that you were unhappy or needed my help. I've never known you to be inaccurate in your speech or writing. And it's been just over eleven years."

"You remembered?"

I nodded, "August 1991. I assume you still believe Brenda is the right person to succeed you?"

"Yes, though that's not up to you, right?"

"Stephanie will come ask and I'll answer in my advisory capacity, but she'll make the final decision. When would your last day be?"

"September 30, which works best for Levi, and gives us time to get our place on the market and wrap up everything here before we disappear for at least three months."

"You're the first person to, in effect, cash out. Terry took a new role, but you're retiring."

"Yes. I take it you'll buy my shares?"

"At the price listed in the quarterly financial reports for retiring employees. Make sure you fill out the correct form with Bob."

"I will. I know this is private, and you clearly don't have to answer, but did you make some kind of deal with Terry?"

I nodded, "Between you and me, yes, there was an arrangement between me and Samantha to work around the much lower valuation for employees who leave for another role."

"You've always leveled with me, so how enforceable is the 'retirement' clause?"

"It isn't, really, which is why the share payout is staggered with the first payment in ninety days at the lower rate and the balance to grant the higher rate two years after that, so long as you haven't taken another full-time role. It has to be real retirement to get the higher payout. Your other option is to keep your shares, but you know they're not marketable or marginable. You will have to either surrender or exercise any outstanding options."

"I already read through the documents, but thanks for the refresher. I never expected to have the kind of wealth you've helped me amass."

"It's mutual," I replied. "Without your hard work, NIKA wouldn't have the value it has. I'll miss you, personally, and NIKA will miss you. You, on the other hand, are not to even think about NIKA during your lengthy sabbatical!"

Sam smiled, "You know I will because you're all like family. I'll send postcards."

"I hope you're starting in the north, given you're going in October."

"Reykjavik, Stockholm, Helsinki, the Baltic States, Saint Petersburg, Warsaw, Berlin, Copenhagen, London, Amsterdam, and so on. It's not as if we're in a big rush, and we'll hopefully be able to ski in Austria and Switzerland."

"Have a great time! I'm jealous."

Sam laughed, "You are not! They'll carry you out of here in a pine box! And it's not like you're lacking for travel!"

"About the 'pine box', you might be surprised."

"OK, you may not work day-to-day, but NIKA will always be your baby."

"True."

"I'm going to speak to Julia now."

"OK. Best wishes, and I hope Loki only gives you positive surprises!"

Sam laughed and shook her head, we exchanged a platonic hug, and she left. I went back to my desk and Penny showed up a couple of minutes later, having obviously been clued in by Kimmy that Sam had left the office.

 Jesse

"Jesus, Block!" Mitch said, shaking his head. "Another hot chick?!"

"Scarlett," I replied with a grin. "She's a Sophomore in college."

"No fucking way!" he exclaimed, a bit too loudly as it turned out.

"MASON!" Coach Palmer hollered. "A hundred laps for profanity!"

"*Shit!*" he grouched *sotto voce*, then skated towards the boards to begin his laps.

Scarlett was sitting with Angelina, who had come to watch us practice nearly every day since tryouts had ended. I'd been a bit concerned, but she'd been super-friendly to Scarlett, so there wasn't any trouble. None of the softball team members were there, but Luna had promised me that most of the team would show up to our games once they started, and Angelina said the same was true of most of the cheerleaders. That would give us a great cheering section, besides the usual collection of parents.

"What happened?" Nicholas asked, skating over.

"He saw Scarlett," I grinned.

Nicholas laughed, "She's smoking hot! And a college girl!"

"Exactly. Get to your spot before Coach Palmer decides you're dogging it!"

"Hey, I always check in with the team captain when I come onto the ice!" he grinned, then skated away to the blue line for two-on-one drills.

With Mitch skating laps, the other five defensemen took turns defending against various combinations of two forwards. I preferred they concentrated on breaking up passes, as one-on-one I was confident I could block the shots. A last-second pass, though, could leave me totally out of position. Freddy was good at taking away the passing lanes, but Mike, Paul, DeShawn, and Tomás were not, and that was what Coach Palmer was having them work on.

On fifty shots, I gave up none when Freddy was the lone defenseman, but thirteen overall, which was not good. A couple of the goals came from the defenseman skating backwards right into me, not paying enough attention to where they were on the ice. That got them serious criticism from Coach Palmer and remedial practice in ice awareness when skating backwards.

When practice finished, Nicholas and I showered, dressed, and grabbed our gear, then went to meet Scarlett and Angelina. We went to Ed Debevic's for lunch, and the waitress chose to flirt with Nicholas, which he clearly appreciated, which amused Scarlett and Angelina.

"Do they always do that?" Scarlett asked.

I nodded, "Yes. It's part of their schtick. Sometimes they'll even sit on a guy's lap."

"Do they ever do anything?" Scarlett asked.

"You mean, like give phone numbers or whatever? No clue. They might even have a rule about it."

"What about the waiters?"

"They do it, too," I replied.

We enjoyed our lunch and the college girl who was our waitress fawned over Nicholas every time she came to the table. He was eating it up, and I was positive that sometime in the next year, some girl would attract his attention; well, assuming Stephie didn't decide to stop being a bitch to him. Actually, she wasn't being a bitch now, so much as totally ignoring him. If she wasn't careful, she'd lose him, but that was her problem, not mine.

When we finished lunch, we headed to Hyde Park, where we dropped Nicholas at home, and then I drove back to my house to hang out with Scarlett and Angelina.

 Birgit

The Girl Gang, which now included Lilibeth, was at my house, along with the Fluffle and Stepsisters, meaning we had nearly twenty girls in the house. Albert had taken one look and immediately left to hang out with Nicky and Peter, who was coming over after dinner to hang out with me, though in a totally different way!

"OK, this is scary!" Jesse exclaimed, coming into the house with Angelina and Scarlett.

"You?" I giggled. "Afraid of girls?"

"Girls who are still in grade school?" he asked. "Yes!"

"My friends and I are all going to be Freshmen in two weeks!"

"Going to be!" he declared. "We're going to use the sauna, unless you had plans."

"No, because of the dumb rules that if every parent doesn't agree, we can't."

"The rules aren't dumb, Sis!" Jesse declared. "You know what happened last year!"

"Dumb parents!" I groused.

He and the two girls went to the basement.

"Are they going to be naked?" Jasmine asked.

"Probably," Stephe replied. "Why?"

"I'd like to see Jesse naked!" she giggled. "He's hot!"

"He's my brother!" Stephe protested.

"But you've seen him, right?"

"Again, he's my brother! Go ask him if you can come into the sauna, so long as your parents agree."

Jasmine frowned, "Not happening. They heard about what went on last school year and made it clear I'm not allowed in there under any circumstances, even with a bathing suit."

"See," I said. "Dumb parents. It's like the dumb idea that you can only have sex in a bed!"

"Can we talk about something besides sex?" Allison asked. "Please?"

"Let's go to the park like we planned," Stephe said.

Everyone left the house, and we walked together almost like a gang. I noticed Lilibeth talking with Libby as we walked, and I hoped she and Lilibeth got together. It wasn't that I would never think about being with Lilibeth again, but I didn't want to make a habit of it. That said, I wished she didn't have her hangup so we could have a threesome with Peter. But after speaking with Aunt Jennifer, I didn't want to push Lilibeth.

"Does your school start the same day as ours does?" Tiffany asked.

"The Lab school starts a week before Chicago Public Schools," I said. "Same for Maria, right?"

"Yes. I tried to talk my mom out of going to an all-girls' school, but no luck. She did say she didn't think I'd have trouble meeting boys!"

I laughed, "Just hang out at Jesse's hockey games! There are twenty hot guys! Well, two of them are gay, but you know what I mean."

"How do you know they're gay?" Kaley asked.

"Well, Tim is out," I replied, "and I'm pretty sure DeShawn is gay, but black guys have a real problem with being out."

"It's totally not cool," Daraja, one of Ashley's friends, said.

"What's wrong with being gay?" Rachel asked.

"Well, uhm, it's just not right," she replied.

"What church do you go to?" I asked.

"First Pentecostal. You don't go to church, do you?"

"No. Only Jesse goes."

"But he just took two girls downstairs!" she protested.

I laughed, "Jesse does not agree with what Christianity teaches about sex! Nobody in my family does."

"Don't let my parents know," she replied. "My cousin's dad is pastor of the church I go to."

"Nobody here talks about church unless somebody else brings it up," I said. "And if anyone asks, I just say I don't go to church and leave it at that unless someone gets in my face about it."

"Leah!" Tiffany exclaimed. "I heard she got approval for an after-school Bible club."

"Ugh," I groaned. "Just what we need!"

"What's wrong with the Bible?" Daraja asked.

"Don't ask!" Hannah cautioned. "If you do, you'll never be the same!"

"What do you mean?" Daraja asked.

"Birgit knows the Bible really well, including all the parts your pastor doesn't want you to read, and also where the translations are messed up."

"I, uhm, er..."

"Let's change the subject," I suggested.

"Good plan!" Tiffany declared.

 Steve

"I know," I said when Stephanie called me to her office, where Julia was sitting on the couch.

"How?" Julia asked.

"She came to me first as a courtesy," I replied. "I was the one who hired her. You aren't going to change her mind, and she's just the first. There will be others, too."

"You're awfully calm about it," Julia replied. "She's one of our key employees."

I nodded, "She is, but Brenda is capable of stepping into the role. Is she the same as Sam? No. But that's OK, too. Someday, you and Dave are going to come to me and say the same thing. The same is true for Cindi. Elyse will stay as long as I do, but not a second longer. And someday, my sister will hang it up. Heck, she could buy you and me both at this point and have money left over!"

"You should have accepted Noel Spurgeon's offer!" Stephanie declared.

"Right, because I was going to divorce Jess and abandon Kara. I would never do that, even for Samantha!"

"What offer?" Julia asked.

"About ten years ago he made me an over-the-top offer, where I'd have made a million bucks a year, at least. He wanted someone to take over Spurgeon and felt I was the guy to do it. Samantha was, in effect, bait. I turned him down because of what I just said, but also because I felt Samantha should be his heir, not the guy she married, and because I wanted to stay at NIKA. I think time has proven me to be correct on all counts."

"You're OK with promoting Brenda?" Stephanie asked.

I smiled, "That's not up to me, but I did say she was capable of filling that role. Julia, what do you think?"

"That you're still too calm."

"Would me becoming emotional or fretting change anything? Anything at all?"

"No."

"So why? I let Sam know how valuable she was and how much we'll miss her. But she, like the rest of us, has the right to cash out when it's most advantageous. For her, that's now, so she and Levi can travel, then volunteer with a global relief agency. I can't imagine something more appropriate for a NIKA person to do. Some of us live for work; she doesn't. And I'm not going to hold that against her, or be upset that she's doing what's in her best interest."

"My brother doesn't get emotional about stuff like this, or clowns like the Brauns, or even Dante. He just lets it all roll off like water off a duck's back. But he wins every time because he's unflappable. He doesn't go off half-cocked."

She smirked when she said that and Julia just rolled her eyes. It had been nearly twenty years since Julia and I had been together, and it was simply something which wasn't mentioned out of deference to Dave and her kids.

"She let you know about her last day, right?"

"September 30th," Julia said. "I'll speak with Bob about the paperwork for Brenda's promotion and a new team member. That moves Brenda onto the executive compensation plan."

"Name her a NIKA Fellow as well," I said. "That is one thing that is still my call. She's worthy, and it's important for continuity."

"I'll take care of it," Julia said.

"Usual award for being named a Fellow?" Stephanie asked.

"Yes. Cash and options."

"I'll take care of that with Bob once Julia does the paperwork."

"Good. Then I'm going back to my office to do my actual job!"

Both women laughed, I got up, and left the office.

August 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"The medical consensus is that Doctor Kirilenko is correct," Jessica said when I arrived home from work on Tuesday evening.

"And the spousal opinion?" I asked.

"You know I'm the most risk-averse of anyone in the extended family," Jessica replied.

"And what did your dad have to say?" I asked.

"That I needed to accept the opinions of the specialists, of course."

"Babe, I won't do it if it upsets you. I've lived this long without doing it."

"After a fashion."

"Yes, that's true, though you know the circumstances in Japan were not strictly of my making."

"It's OK, Tiger, but I have one, well, request, and that is that you have a neuro scan every year, and that you see Doctor Klein if you take a significant blow to the head."

"I agree, obviously, as I'm sure Mayo will continue the MRI EEGs and limited CT scans, though I'm not sure how often they'll do the CTs based on total radiation exposure. Also, I have no plans at all to compete, so it would only be at our dojo or Molly's."

"Thank you," Jessica said with a smile.

We had dinner as a family, then headed to the dojo. I asked Will to speak with him and we went into his office. I handed him the letter from Doctor Kirilenko.

"I'm cleared to spar, «Shihan»,” I said.

Will quickly read the letter and smiled, "That's welcome news. What changed, if I may ask?"

"Medical knowledge," I replied. "Research discovered that the vast majority of individuals who suffered recurrence of post-concussion syndrome had misaligned cervical vertebrae. I do not, which means that my risk is no different from any other person who doesn't have that particular physical problem."

"Do you plan to compete?"

I shook my head, "No. The only person I'm interested in competing against is me. And I think I better serve the interests of ISKA as Tournament Director. What I can do is help train our students to compete in sparring, not just kata."

"OK. Shall we lead the class?"

"Yes!"

After class, I let Birgit, Stephanie, and Ashley know about being able to spar.

"You're sure it's safe?" Ashley asked.

"The doctors say I am," I replied. "Does it worry you?"

"I want you to be around for a long time, Dad!"

"It's safe, Ashley," Jessica said. "He showed me the results, and I checked with your grandpa and someone who specializes in brain injuries."

"You mean besides being a boy?" Birgit asked with a smirk.

"That's testosterone poisoning!" Ashley smirked. "That's what Aunt Josie says!"

"Aunt Josie has a point," Birgit agreed.

"ANYWAY," I chuckled, "because I don't have any physical impairments, it's safe for me to spar."

When we arrived home, Peter was waiting for Birgit, and they disappeared up to her room.

"How long has that been going on?" I asked.

"Since we arrived home from Sweden," Ashley said. "You didn't know?"

I shrugged, "It's not my business, and Peter is a good kid."

 Birgit

"What time do you have to be home?" I asked Peter when we were resting after we'd fucked twice.

"11:00pm, but somebody will have to drive me or walk with me if it's after 10:00pm because of the curfew.

"I made sure Natalie was available," I said. "She promised to stay up so she could walk with us."

"Cool."

"When does Mount Carmel start classes?"

"The same day as the Lab School," Peter replied.

"It's all boys, right?"

"Yes. They have a hockey team and they play Jesse's team in October. Chris Chelios played for the school team, and NFL quarterback Donovan McNabb played football there."

"The Lab School doesn't really have competitive sports teams because they have an 'everyone plays' rule. That's why Jesse decided to stay at Kenwood Academy. I guess you don't have cheerleaders."

"I think there's a pep squad, but it would be all guys, of course."

"I'd hate going to an all-girls' school like some of my friends."

"Well, you have me, so you don't need any other guys!" Peter declared.

That was NOT true, and I hoped he didn't mean what it sounded like he meant, because I wasn't about to go steady with anyone at this point.

"You remember we're not steady, right?" I asked.

"Yes, but you like doing it with me and I make you orgasm, right?"

"Lots!" I agreed. "And you can use your tongue to give me more, then fuck me again before we have to walk to your house!"

"I can cum more than once! Will you suck me in the shower?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "Now get your tongue in me!"

XV. And she's right!

August 24, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Ashley

"Happy birthday, Cinderella!" Dad exclaimed when I came into the sunroom on Saturday morning.

Birgit gave me an evil look, but got up from the chaise. I was positive Dad had told her she had to let me have some time with him, but that didn't mean she liked giving up what she considered 'her' time. That was just too bad for her, because he was my dad, too! I walked over and got into the chaise and snuggled, but not the way Birgit did when she draped her body over Dad the way a girlfriend would.

"How does it feel to be eleven?" Dad asked.

"The same as it did to be ten!" I giggled. "Ask me when I turn sixteen and can have my driver's license!"

"I think the world can wait for that," Dad chuckled.

"Oh, please! Everyone else will have their license by then! And that includes Birgit! Talk about scary! That's even scarier than Jesse!"

"Jesse is a good, careful driver," Dad countered. "But I think you're right to be worried about Birgit!"

"I HEARD THAT!" Birgit exclaimed from where she was sitting in a chair.

"You were meant to!" I giggled. "You're so easy to wind up!"

"Did you take lessons from Jesse?" Dad asked me.

"No! But I know everyone in this house better than they know themselves!"

"Speaking of scary," Dad chuckled.

"I know, right?" I giggled.

"Who all is going to be at your party this afternoon?" Dad asked.

"All the girls," I replied. "Twenty-six girls and no boys!"

"I'm glad I'll be at the dojo with my students!" Dad declared.

I laughed, "And if they were all High School girls?"

"No comment," Dad replied with a grin.

"Uh-huh," I replied flatly.

"You know my rules," Dad said. "Your friends are off limits. The same is true for Stephanie's friends."

"But not Birgit's!" I declared. "They all want you! Well, most of them. And she's OK with it! She tried to give away tickets!"

"How do you know about that?" Dad asked.

"I know everything!" I giggled. "There are no secrets in this house or the coach house!"

"You, young lady, are a menace!"

"Thank you!" I exclaimed happily.

"Breakfast!" Kara Mom called out from the door to the sunroom.

"Coming!" I replied.

We got up and went to the dining room for breakfast, joined by the rest of the family except mom, who was at work at the hospital.

"Happy birthday, Ashley-chan!" Yuriko said as she helped Suzanne serve breakfast.

"Thank you! Are you coming to the party this afternoon?"

"I wouldn't miss it!" Yuriko exclaimed.

I was happy that she, Natalie, and Estrella would be there, along with all of my friends, Stephie's friends, and Birgit's friends, along with Chelsea. It was going to be a great party, and then I'd have another one with the extended family on Sunday evening.

 Steve

After lunch, I returned to the dojo with Suzanne and Avanti, with Birgit electing to attend Ashley's party rather than participate in the usual Saturday session with my private karate students. I was very happy that Avanti had returned

from her lengthy summer trip to India with her family, and she'd join me at the house after the session.

"We're going to do something new today," I said. "After Miyu leads us in our meditation and exercises, I'll spar with each of you for three minutes."

"Uh-oh," Neil chuckled.

"You don't think that brown belt is just for show, do you?" Molly asked.

"No," Neil replied, "but I have a strong suspicion that despite not sparring for a decade or so, Steve's skills are better than anyone here, except perhaps Miyu."

"Thanks for that vote of confidence!" Molly declared.

"Will there be restrictions?" Miyu asked.

"Other than you not being permitted to participate because you're almost six months pregnant, no."

"A year from now I want a full, no-holds barred challenge, Sensei!"

"And you'll have it!" I replied.

"And to think Birgit is missing out!" Suzanne declared mirthfully. "She is not going to be happy!"

"I'm positive she'll make a challenge similar to the one Miyu just made," I replied.

"Miyu? Please begin."

"Yes, Sensei!" she exclaimed.

She moved to the front of the dojo, lit incense before the shrine, which contained Hiro-san's ashes, and clapped her hands loudly. After two minutes of silent meditation, she led our exercises, which were not strenuous but about stretching.

"I think Neil should be first," Molly declared. "Given his impertinence!"

Everyone laughed, and I nodded. Neil and I went to the lockers and retrieved sparring gear, which we quickly donned. Miyu acted as referee, had us bow, then called out 'Begin!'

I was rusty, but kata were an excellent way to practice the necessary moves without contact, and my regular practice served me well, easily defeating Neil by connecting three strikes, then pinning him, while only receiving one glancing blow to the hip in return.

"That does not bode well for the rest of us," Rachel Kealty said.

"He won't use the same techniques on you," Molly said. "He'll limit himself to those through green belt for anyone who isn't a brown belt."

"I'm not sure how much that helps," Rachel countered. "I'll go next."

She put on gear and we sparred, with me doing as Molly had suggested and limiting myself to things Rachel knew, even if she hadn't necessarily perfected them. I won easily, but she accounted well for an orange belt. The matches with the others were equally easy, until Molly's turn, which was the final bout.

She was very good, and actually gave me a run for my money, connecting two strong strikes, one to my chest and one to my stomach, and almost managed to sweep my leg. I managed to avoid that, reverse, and pin her to the mat to win the match.

"You're very good," I said to Molly.

"Thanks to your training! How do I beat you?"

"You have to out-think me," I replied. "Your skills are good enough, but I was ready for the sweep, and turned it around on you."

"How did you know it was coming?"

"Your eyes and your hips," I replied. "Your eyes flitted down for a second, and you shifted your weight. We can work on that, as I've worked with others in the past. The key is not to telegraph what you're going to do, and to be able to strike from an off-balance or awkward position. Surprise is the key, or if not surprise, then a bit of deception. You know the saying 'fake left, move right'? But you have to sell it."

"Who can beat you?" Rachel asked.

"Sensei Jim felt he could, but we never had the chance. If I ever visit Japan, I'm sure that now that I'm permitted to spar, we'll find out! Will is probably evenly matched. Miyu is probably better, because she has the experience from competition. Once she has her baby, we'll find out if she's as good as I think she is."

"Better!" Miyu declared.

I laughed, "Now you sound like my daughters!"

"They do have your number, Sensei!" she exclaimed.

Molly and I removed our gear, then everyone sat in a circle to have a philosophy lesson.

 Jesse

After lunch on Saturday, Scarlett and I took the L into the Loop to meet Matthew, Chelsea, and some of their friends. I'd had a really good week with Scarlett, and Angelina had been totally cool about hanging out with us and not acting jealous.

"Jesse, you remember Maggie and Mark, I'm sure," Matthew said. "And guys, this is Jesse's friend Scarlett from Minnesota."

"Are you a Junior?" Maggie asked.

"No," Scarlett replied. "I'll start my Sophomore year at UM next week."

"Whoa!" Mark exclaimed. "You're in college?"

"Yes."

Mark looked at me and I just smiled smugly, causing him to laugh and shake his head.

"Bacino's for dinner and *One Hour Photo*?" Matthew suggested. "It stars Robin Williams and is supposed to be really good."

"You can get in to see an R-rated movie?" Scarlett asked.

"Chelsea is my cousin and can act as my guardian! But if she buys all the tickets, nobody will ask or care. We've done it before. The theater is happy to sell the tickets and the Chicago cops couldn't possibly care less about stuff like that. So long as we don't cause trouble, nobody bothers us."

I wondered about Mark and Maggie because they went to an evangelical church, but that was their business, not mine, and if they were cool with it, I wasn't going to say a word.

"Your cousin?" Scarlett asked.

"First cousins, once removed," Matthew said. "Illinois doesn't have a problem with it, and neither do we, obviously."

"Genetics?" Scarlett asked.

"Mostly myth," Matthew countered. "I mean, if we were the Hapsburgs and married relatives for generations, sure, but not for something like this."

"Every time I think it can't get any weirder..."

Maggie laughed, "Never, ever, say that around Matt or his family, because it can *always* get weirder!"

 Birgit

"What!" I exclaimed in outrage when Suzanne told me about sparring with dad.

"Hey, you chose to come to Ashley's party instead of your dad's session!" Suzanne declared. "You only have yourself to blame!"

"Grr," I growled. "He and I are going to have words!"

Suzanne laughed, "He fully expects you to challenge him to a no-holds-barred sparring competition."

"Maybe I can get him to pin me to the mat!" I giggled. "Repeatedly!"

"I thought you gave up on that?" Suzanne countered.

"A girl can dream, can't she?" I asked with a smirk. "I have to think about someone when I use my personal massager!"

"You are bad, Birgit!"

"I know!" I giggled. "It's WAY more fun to be bad than to be good, though when I'm really bad, I'm really good!"

"At fourteen?" Suzanne asked, but it was clear she was teasing.

"Not my fault you waited until you were eighteen!" I declared.

"Yes, but I got to be deflowered by your dad!"

"Grr, I growled again. "That's not f...nice!"

"Let's join the party again!"

We went from the kitchen where I had been getting a bottle of Sprite and rejoined all the girls in the great room.

 Steve

"You could have joined the party," I said to Avanti as we went into the sauna. "I wouldn't be upset."

"I'd much rather spend time with you," she said. "I haven't seen you before today since before you left for Europe. I'll hang out with Birgit and her friends another time. Does that bother you?"

"Not at all, and I'm pleased you want to spend time with me."

"I do. And I am very much looking forward to January. What are we working on today?"

"We'll practice our breathing techniques," I replied. "I hadn't really done those from when your mom began seeing your dad until you and I did them earlier this year. But first, let's just relax in the steam."

We sat down and were quiet for a few minutes before I spoke.

"Which High School are you attending?" I asked.

"Fenwick in Oak Park. Mom and Dad think it's a better choice than the public schools, despite it being Roman Catholic. I went to All Saints Catholic Academy in Naperville for K through 8th."

"That's co-ed, right?"

"Yes, since 1992. I prefer being at a school with both boys and girls, though I think dad would prefer if I were at one of the schools that only admitted girls."

"Your dad is very conservative."

"So is Mom, but in a different way. And, to be honest, so am I. It's just that Mom's sexual ethics are Eastern, not Western, and I agree with them. Otherwise, she's probably the most conservative female friend you have. Well, that's what she says."

"I'd say that's a reasonable assessment, so long as you understand it in the context of Eastern thought, not Western. The word 'conservative' here tends to indicate prudishness."

"Yes, because it's tied to the Christian faith," Avanti declared. "And that tends to be very narrow-minded, especially with regard to nudity and sex, but also to science, as demonstrated many times in the past by the Roman Catholic Church and now by evangelical Protestants."

"Your mom has certainly instilled her thinking into you."

"The same as you have to your kids, but each one has a different expression of that thinking. Birgit and Albert are quite different!"

I chuckled, "No kidding."



August 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"You're only going to marry an Orthodox girl, right?" Scarlett asked as we headed from the church to Midway for her flight back to Minneapolis.

"Or someone who is willing to convert," I replied. "I think it's important to attend church together as a family. I remember you saying you don't go to church."

"Not since I was sixteen," Scarlett replied. "Mom and Dad go, but it didn't do anything for me and I have better use of an hour on Sunday morning than sitting in church."

"Standing three or four hours in church?" I asked.

"I actually don't mind your church, but it's a bit over-the-top, don't you think?"

"A bit?" I asked with a grin. "More like WAY over-the-top. But I like the rituals, or what my friend Brooke, who's Episcopalian, calls 'smells and bells'. I think the services are beautiful and they help me stay on an even keel. Everything else about my life is totally crazy, and a bit of stability is a good thing!"

"I have to agree with you on the crazy! I have a question, but I'm not sure I should ask."

"What?"

"Does Chelsea know that Maggie is in love with Matthew?"

"I have no idea. I don't really pay attention to stuff like that. How do you know?"

"The way she looks at him. She doesn't look at her own boyfriend that way."

"Well, I don't think it matters. Matthew and Chelsea have been a couple for ten years! Well, in her mind, anyway. Matthew figured it out when he hit puberty! He'd never, ever cheat on her. If there is one rule upon which everyone in the family agrees, it's 'no cheating, ever'. That means we don't cheat and we don't help anyone else cheat. That's as firm as the STI testing and birth control rules."

"They're in drama together, right?"

"Yes, and Matthew and Maggie are the two thespians who don't fit the stereotype."

"You never know," Scarlett replied.

"Actually, I do," I said firmly.

"Sorry," Scarlett said. "It was just an observation."

"It's OK."

"Would it be possible for me to visit sometime during Christmas vacation?"

"Probably," I replied. "But let's discuss it in November when we have a better idea of what's going on. OK?"

"Sure. It's OK to call you?"

"Of course."

At Midway, I walked Scarlett to security, but with the 9-11 security rules in place, that was as far as I could go. We hugged, exchanged a kiss, and then she got in line. I waited until she'd cleared security, then headed home so we could celebrate Ashley's birthday.

 Ashley

"Happy birthday!" everyone exclaimed once they'd sung to me after we'd finished dinner.

"Thank you!"

"You're growing up so fast," Grandpa Al said to me. "It seems like just yesterday you were born."

"Eleven years is my entire life! It's only what? A sixth of yours?"

"A bit less, but you make a good point about relative time. It was over fifty years ago I had my eleventh birthday. I lived in Anaheim, California then. My dad, your great grandpa, was an aeronautical engineer who worked for Lockheed during World War II. He was involved with the P-38 Lightning project."

"Those are totally cool!" Albert interjected. "Did you ever ride in one?"

"No," Grandpa Al replied. "I was five when the war ended, and there was no way, because of security, that I could have gone into that facility. You know they interned all the Japanese from the West Coast in concentration camps."

"Yes," Albert replied. "Dad arranged for Sensei Ichirou to speak at my school about that."

"So, unfortunately, I couldn't fly in one. On the other hand, we lived about three miles from where Disneyland eventually opened, which was when I was fifteen. I went to college in Texas, then returned to California for medical school at UCLA. I was there when your dad was born, not far from where I lived."

"Was that before you had your affair with Grandma Angela?"

"No, it was after," he replied. "That happened when I was at UT Austin doing my undergraduate work. Your grandmother told me she was pregnant, but she decided to stay with her husband. I didn't see your mom until 1978, when she went to UCLA for a campus visit. I used my connections to ensure she could go to medical school there, but she instead chose to come to Indiana University. And that's a good thing, because if she'd gone to UCLA, no Albert and no Ashley!"

"Hmm," Jesse said with a grin.

"Hey!" I protested. "You love me!"

"But sisters..." he teased. "Well, you know!"

I rolled my eyes, "What-ever! We can't possibly be worse than brothers!"

"How about we have cake and ice cream?" Dad suggested.

"You can have some?" I asked.

"Kara-san made your cake," Yuriko interjected, "and I made one from almond flour your dad can eat. The ice cream is from the churn, which Kara-san says is OK for him to eat."

Stephie, Birgit, and Yuriko went to the kitchen and came back with two cakes and a tub of homemade ice cream. Dad lit the candles on my cake, which was white cake with strawberry frosting, and I blew out the candles. Kara Mom cut the cakes, while Dad served ice cream, and once we'd all had our dessert, I opened my presents. I was very happy with what everyone gave me, and the best gifts were a necklace from Grandpa Al and a cute dress from Dad, Mom, and Kara mom. I also really liked the two Japanese scarves Yuriko got me, which would go nicely with the dress.

All in all, it was a great birthday.



August 26, 2002, Chicago, Illinois



Jesse

On Monday afternoon, Libby and I were playing video games in the Duck's nest when I heard a knock at the door. I paused the game and went upstairs to answer the door.

"Hi, Jesse!" Robin exclaimed.

"Hi," I said non-committally.

"Can I come in?"

"I have a friend here, playing video games."

"Oh," she said, pouting. "I was hoping we could...you know."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I replied.

She pouted again, "Why? Didn't you like it?"

I wondered if I should be totally honest with her, and decided it was best if I was, as I really wasn't interested in being with her again because sex with her had been mundane at best, and I didn't want to have her thinking there was more to what we'd done than just screwing.

"Honestly? You behaved like a little girl, not like a woman."

"What?!" she gasped. "Why would you say that?"

"Did you read the book I suggested?"

"You're unhappy because I wouldn't let you put your mouth between my legs?"

"You think that's gross, and it's something I enjoy doing."

"Because you want me to put your thing in my mouth!"

"I like that, too, but I would lick you even if you didn't do that."

"But it's totally gross!"

"If you don't want, don't. But then find someone else to fool around with."

"You're mean, Jesse Block! And a pervert!"

She turned and stormed away. I shut the door and went back to the basement. I picked up the controller, un-paused the game, and Libby and I began playing again.

"Who was that?"

"A new Freshman who thinks oral sex is disgusting and I'm a pervert for wanting to do that."

"You're joking!" Libby exclaimed.

"I kid you not. She wouldn't let me go down on her and said it was gross. I tried to get her to read Bethany's book, but she refused because she said she knew how to have sex. She wanted to do it again, and I said I wasn't interested because it was boring."

"Whoa! You said that?"

"Not directly. What I said was she approached sex like a little girl, not a woman. She figured out what I meant, and that's when she told me I was a pervert."

"She has no clue what she's missing!" Libby declared.

"How are things with Lilibeth?"

"SHE doesn't think that's gross! And she sure doesn't think I'm a pervert!"

"This cheerleader is actually the first girl to ever refuse to even let me go down on her."

"She sounds too immature to have had sex."

"I know that now," I said. "Maybe I should have stopped when she wouldn't let me lick her."

"You got to pop her cherry!"

I shrugged, "You know that doesn't mean anything to me. I don't care if girls are virgins or experienced, so long as they're fun. She wasn't."

"Me?"

"You were lots of fun! But then you went over to the dark side exclusively!"

"Not exclusively! We can go upstairs and I can prove it to you!"

"You and Lilibeth aren't a couple?"

"Just fuck buddies right now. Kind of like you and me."

"Then put down the controller and we'll go fuck, buddy!"

Libby laughed, "Race you!"

We dropped the controllers and raced each other to my room. She got there first, but I still won, and so did she!

 Birgit

"The guy working behind the counter is HOT," Tiffany whispered as we stood trying to decide what kind of ice cream to have.

"I thought you wanted my dad," I whispered back.

"I do! But the guy behind the counter is still hot!"

"Tiffany is right!" Hannah declared. "But he's at least twenty!"

"I bet I could get him," I giggled quietly.

"Like that's a challenge!" Tiffany whispered. "He's already checking you out!"

He was, and I wondered if he'd be interested if he knew I was only fourteen, or if he'd act like Kevin at the dojo? There was only one way to find out! I stepped up to the counter and smiled brightly at the boy whose name tag read 'Antonio'.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

"A double scoop of cherry in a cake cone, please!" I said.

"\$2.75, please," he said.

I paid, and he made my cone and handed it to me. I made a show of licking the cone, then winked at him.

He laughed and shook his head, "Come back when you graduate High School."

I screwed up my face and glared at him, then walked outside, past my friends. When they got their ice cream, they came outside to where I was waiting on the sidewalk.

"What IS it with guys?" I groused. "I'm a woman!"

"They obviously don't think so," Julie said.

"They think we're 'jailbait'," Naomi observed.

"Dumb old men need to keep their dumb laws off my body!" I declared. "It's totally none of their business if I want to fuck or if a girl needs an abortion!"

"Amen, Sister!" Lilibeth declared.

"Did you know in Germany, the law is fourteen?" I asked. "In Sweden it's fifteen, but that's still way more rational than seventeen or eighteen, like lots of places in the US!"

"It's seventeen here, right?" Missy asked.

"Yes," I replied. "But so long as the guy is under eighteen, nobody will do much about it."

"Aren't they just trying to protect us from guys like the creep at Water Tower Place?" Hannah asked.

"I don't think the law protected Birgit!" Tiffany declared. "I think a kick to the balls was effective!"

"Seriously," I said. "If he hadn't touched my shoulder, I'd just have kept telling him 'no' until he walked away. He chose poorly and had to be taken away on a stretcher!"

"What about girls who don't know karate?" Zaida, a new girl Missy had invited to join us, asked.

"The law won't protect them!" I said. "Laws don't protect anyone! Criminals don't pay attention to laws."

"Neither do you!" Hannah declared.

"Not dumb ones!" I agreed. "It's like the morons who constantly try to ban abortion when it's a medical procedure and the only opinions which matter are those of the woman and her doctor, and her partner if she chooses to ask!"

"What are we doing now?" Tiffany asked.

"Let's go back to Birgit's house and listen to music and play games," Hannah suggested. "OK, Birgit?"

"Yes!"

 Steve

"Got a minute?" Liz asked from the door of the office.

"I do," I replied. "Private?"

"No. I just wanted to let you know that the Brauns both reached comprehensive plea deals to resolve all charges, and they were signed this morning."

"How much Federal time?"

"Two years, and then four in Colorado, with day-for-day for good behavior."

"And Clay?"

"He's fighting the charges tooth and nail, and the wheels of justice grind slow if your attorney plays all the angles. His is."

"He's still cooling his heels in the hoosegow, right?"

"Yes. Colorado is refusing to allow him to plead to anything less than attempted murder. He's been trying for some kind of assault and battery charge, which would get him out in a couple of years; the state wants ten, at least, on just the attempted murder charge. The other lesser charges would tack on five or so, and that doesn't include the charges relating to NIKA."

"I'm happy for those to be dismissed in favor of the murder and assault charges," I replied. "You let the Prosecutor know, right?"

"Yes. The Feds want him on those, but, honestly, I think they'll allow him to plead guilty and give him parole once his Colorado time is served."

"I'm fine with that, obviously."

"OK. The other thing is that Jacob let me know the bankruptcy court issued the final orders, so that case is closed as of today as well."

"Excellent!"

"Have you heard anything about Carol Corday?"

"No," I replied.

As if Liz had uttered an incantation, Kimmy let me know via the intercom that Gwen Meyer was calling.

"Wow!" Penny exclaimed. "That is weird!"

"Liz is just that good!" I chuckled.

Penny rolled her eyes and went back to typing on her workstation keyboard. Kimmy transferred the call, and I picked up the line.

"Hi, Gwen," I said.

"Hi, Steve. Two things. First, Carol Corday pled guilty to federal kidnapping and interstate flight charges. The state dismissed their charges."

"How much time?"

"Two years in minimum security, actual time, minus time she's served awaiting trial. She'll have two years of probation afterwards, and can't have any contact with Francesca before Francesca turns eighteen."

"I'd say she got off fairly easy," I replied.

"That's normal in these custody dispute cases. The court did order psychological counseling, but I don't know any details because those records are under seal."

"She needs it," I replied. "What was the other thing?"

"I'm going to stop practicing full time as of December 31st. I'll continue with any active cases and select clients until all active cases are complete. I'll keep

handling your family needs until the day I finish my final case, with the caveat that I'd ask the attorney who is effectively taking over my practice to handle any court cases that might extend beyond the others."

"Let's hope there aren't any!" I declared. "Who is the new attorney?"

"Becka Scott-Potter," Gwen replied. "She's from your neck of the woods and is about your age. She went to Xavier in Cincinnati and then John Marshall. I think you'll like her. Her husband is a computer geek like you!"

I chuckled, "Where does he work?"

"For a brokerage firm -- Fimat, which is part of the French bank, Société Générale."

"I know it. We have consultants at FFM, which is another division. I'd appreciate it if you had her call me so we could meet."

"I had planned to do that," Gwen said. "I'll ask her to call you."

"Is she independent now?"

"Yes, she has a practice similar to mine, and has a junior partner, something I chose not to do. They can handle the combined workload, and you know some clients will jump ship because they don't click with her."

"What do you plan to do once you've wound things down?"

"Spoil the heck out of my grandkids as revenge against my son and daughter!" she exclaimed.

I laughed, "That sounds like an awesome plan! How many grandkids?"

"Five. I also plan to visit Jerusalem. Something I've wanted to do since I was a young girl, but never had the chance."

"Enjoy!"

"I'll have Becka call you."

"Thanks."

I replaced the handset in the cradle.

"Gwen is going part time after December 31st," I said to Liz. "Until she winds down the work she's doing for the client base, then retiring. She has a younger attorney lined up to take over the practice."

"She's been your family attorney forever, right?"

"Since July 1985," I replied. "She's going to retain us until she's completely done, though. And she's going to have the attorney who's taking over her clients call me."

"Who, if I can ask."

"Becka Scott-Potter, who went to Xavier in Cincinnati, then John Marshall. She's going to call to set up a meeting."

"OK," Liz replied. "I'm going back to my office. Call if you need me."

"I always need you," I said with a smile.

"Thanks!"

 Jesse

"I need to take the call," I said to Libby who was cuddled close. "It's my dad."

"You know, I still wonder..." she teased.

"And you're free to give him a test drive if you want, but no more of this!"

"Forget it!" she exclaimed. "Answer your call."

I flipped open my mobile phone, "Go for Jesse!"

"It's Dad; I just heard from Mrs. Meyer, and Francesca's mom accepted a plea deal for two years, minus time she's served. She's also prohibited any contact with Francesca until Francesca turns eighteen."

"Which is before her mom would get out of prison. Federal, right?"

"Yes. They'll send her to Club Fed. The state dismissed their charges. She was also ordered to undergo psychological counseling."

"She needs it!" I declared.

"Just to keep you in the loop, Mrs. Meyer is retiring. She'll be part time after December 31st, but she'll continue to handle our family needs until she finishes with all her other clients."

"With the retainer and fees we pay, I wouldn't expect otherwise!"

Dad laughed, "That, too, but it's not the main reason. She's been our family attorney from the time you were born, and set up all the agreements between your moms and me for the care and feeding of little ducks."

"Look, Penguin..."

Dad laughed again, "I'll leave you to Miss Monday, whoever that is now that CeCe has gone to college."

"Libby and I are playing video games," I replied.

"Well, don't break your joystick!" Dad teased.

"See you later, Dad!" I declared.

We said 'goodbye' and I closed the phone and put it back on the dresser.

"Francesca's mom is going to Club Fed for two years, and has to have psychological counseling."

"Well, she's certifiable, so no surprise there! Why did you tell your dad we were playing video games?"

"Because he asked who 'Miss Monday' was!" I chuckled.

"Not going to do that again?"

"Not intentionally," I replied. "All the girls from last year except Angelina either have steady boyfriends or went to college. Of course, with the way my life goes..."

Libby laughed, "Poor baby!"

"That was NOT a complaint! One more round of 'perverted behavior' before we shower?"

"You can lick my pussy for as long as you want!"

"Don't mind if I do!"

 Matthew

"How was your first day of classes?" I asked Chelsea when she arrived back at the townhouse late on Monday afternoon.

"Mostly each professor just went over their syllabus, how they grade, and so on. I have some reading to do, but not too much."

"So no lectures at all?"

"Some, but it was mostly either introduction, or, in math, review of what we should already know. I had calculus in High School, so the first semester will mostly be review for me."

"What do you think of your professors?"

"The math professor is Chinese, and is a bit hard to understand, but it's math, and I'm good at it, so I don't think it'll be a problem. My professor for English Composition is a hardcore feminist, but I know how to say the right things to keep her from causing me any trouble. The biology prof is an absentminded professor type, and kind of goofy. The computer science instructor is a complete nerd!"

"What would you expect?"

"I was hoping for someone more like your dad or your Uncle Dave!"

"What language are you using?"

"BASIC. It's on IBM PCs."

"Ugh. PCs are good for games, but Macs running OS X are way better computers! Did you know that on an IBM PC, that to install a Microsoft Mouse in Windows you have to load a driver from diskette or CD. On a Mac, you plug in the Microsoft Mouse and it just works."

"No way!" Chelsea protested.

"Truth. Microsoft Windows can't even automatically detect and install the Mouse because it needs a special driver. Mac OS X doesn't!"

"Crazy! What's for dinner?"

"I'm making shrimp stir fry. It'll be ready in about fifteen minutes."

"Cool! Let me change into something more comfortable."

She went to the bedroom and I went back to the kitchen.

 Steve

"Steve Adams, meet Antoinette Baldwin," Holly said when she, Jackson, and a gorgeous strawberry blonde girl arrived at the house after dinner.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"Hi!" Antoinette said brightly.

"While you two get acquainted, Jackson and I are going to hang out with Suzanne, Natalie, Yuriko, and Tabitha."

"OK. Antoinette, let's go to my study," I suggested.

She smiled and followed me. I shut the door, and we sat side-by-side in two of the leather wingback chairs.

"Holly tells me you're looking for a mentor," I said.

"Yes. She told you how often I moved, right?"

"Yes. Did she mention how often I moved?"

"No."

"I went to a different school every year from pre-K through 7th grade, and if you count school buildings, not districts, the only time I was in the same building for two consecutive years was for eighth and ninth grade."

"You were an exchange student, right?"

"Yes. I was in Sweden for my Junior year of High School."

"I went to six different schools, and my last two years were at the International School in Amsterdam."

"Why do you feel you need a mentor?"

"To become the person I want to be. You can imagine my dad didn't have a lot of time for me and my sister, and with my mom's cancer, she didn't either. I mostly kept to myself, and Holly was the closest thing I had to a best friend, and she was here in the States while I was overseas for most of my life."

"How do you think I can help you?"

"You can teach me critical thinking. I believe I need what Jackson and Holly called a complete reset in my way of thinking."

"I suspect they used a term you're reluctant to say, but if you can't say it, you can't do it."

Antoinette laughed softly, "Seriously? I've never said that word in my entire life!"

"Seriously. The first step on the path to enlightenment is learning to discard social norms and not be bound by them. You plan to study linguistics, right?"

"Yes."

"If you've studied at all, and I'm sure you have given Holly and Jackson both said you were intrigued by languages, you know that profanity and what is known as 'acceptable speech' or 'polite speech' has changed, and continues to change. Up through about ten years ago, the usual epithets hurled at someone who offended you were 'son of a bitch' or 'bastard'.

"Now, and I'll defer to your delicate sensibilities for the moment, the usual term would be 'a-hole'. These days, if I used 'SOB' or 'bastard', it's as likely to be friendly as insulting. The same is true for 'mofo' -- it was a blood insult in the past, but now can be used in a friendly way, *a la* Samuel L. Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*. Have you seen it?"

"No."

"You should. Have you read *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Heinlein?"

"No."

"Then you have a dual assignment," I replied. "Watch *Pulp Fiction* and read *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Be prepared to discuss them the next time I see you. You're going to attend Philosophy Club, right?"

"Yes. That starts in three weeks, right?"

"September 15th," I replied.

"OK. I can get the movie and the book tomorrow."

"Good."

"Holly suggested there is something else I should ask you to do."

I nodded, "There's another book you should read before you ask that question."

"What book?"

"*Smart Teens; Smart Choices*," I replied. "I'll give you a copy."

"Holly gave me a copy," Antoinette replied. "I've read it."

"Then you have a head start! Complete your assignment and come see me on Sunday morning before Philosophy Club. We'll discuss the movie and book, then you can have lunch with us before Philosophy Club."

"How many people participate?"

"In our chapter, about thirty. There's a North Side chapter, and they have around twenty. They used to be part of our group, but the group grew too large so we chose to split into two groups. My eldest son and eldest daughter have something similar which they call their Hangout with about a dozen of their friends."

"How old are your kids?"

"Jesse is sixteen and Birgit is fourteen," I replied. "The others are Matthew, fifteen; Michael, thirteen; Albert thirteen, Stephe twelve, and Ashley just turned eleven."

"And you're really married to three women?"

"Legally? No. That said, I'm positive anything Holly told you about me and my family is accurate. She and Jackson are very close friends."

"She did say I'd have my entire worldview exploded."

"That is what happens," I replied. "It's about opening your mind to the endless possibilities of the universe, and finding your niche, without caring what other people think or expect."

"She said it's subversive."

"And she's right!"

XVI. A First Takeoff

August 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"You're going to Washington this weekend, right?" Nicholas asked as I drove to hockey practice on Tuesday morning.

"Yes. I leave on Friday evening and I'll be back on Monday morning so I can be at my dad's Labor Day party. I think this is the last time I'll be in DC, though."

"Why? I thought you really liked Larisa!"

"I do! But her mom has a teaching position at Harvard starting in January, so if I visit them, it will be in Boston, not DC."

"Oh! Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What?"

"Do you think your dad and my mom are going to make up?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea. I think it's really up to your mom."

"Why are they fighting over Mom's book?"

"Because she wants to change it to basically say the opposite of what it says now, and that upset my dad."

"But it's her book!"

"Actually, I think she had to sign away her rights to it to have it published. That's what my moms said, anyway. She's not telling you not to hang out with me or Albert, right?"

"No."

"Then don't worry about it. Let them have their spat and you focus on hockey! I want to win the statewide tournament before I graduate!"

We arrived at the rink, grabbed our gear from the back of the SUV, and headed inside to the locker room.

 Michael

"Morning, Mike! Morning, Andi!" Mr. Perez said when we walked into the school building.

"Morning, Mr. Perez!" we both said.

"You're the first two to arrive."

"Eduardo dropped us off on the way to see a client," I said. "Otherwise we wouldn't have had a ride."

"And my mom is picking us up at the end of the day," Andi added.

"OK."

"Hi, Mr. Perez!" Manuel called out, coming into the 'bot shop' as we called the room we used to work on our bot.

Joe came in right after him, and Mr. Perez greeted both guys. The last to arrive was Lydia, a girl who had moved from Arizona and who wanted to join the robotics team.

"First," Mr. Perez said, "we'll disassemble last year's bot. We can re-use most of the parts. Mike, I received the electrical plans and the circuit boards from your aunt yesterday."

"She called me last night to let me know they were delivered," I replied.

Aunt Jennifer had volunteered to create the circuit boards we needed, something which was permitted by the rules, as our other option was to buy something 'off the shelf', but she had designed something that met our specific requirements.

"And I have the parts we need for the re-designed body. The gears, servos, and wheels from the old bot will be re-used. I have the new parts for the lifter. Mike and Andi, you disassemble the old bot; Manuel, you disassemble the old controller; Joe and Lydia, you work with me on cleaning and lubricating the parts, and checking for damage."

I retrieved the toolkit and Andi and I got to work.

 Birgit

"What's that?" Peter asked.

"My personal massager!" I giggled. "It's *very* personal!"

"What do you mean?"

I turned it on and held it against his palm.

"Feel that?" I asked.

He nodded. I turned it off, then handed it to him. He looked confused and watched as I quickly undressed. When I was naked, I grasped his wrist and gently moved his arm until the tip of the vibrator was against the flesh that covered my button.

"Turn it on, and you turn ME on!" I giggled.

"Whoa!" he gasped.

"It can go inside, too!"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously! Didn't you read that section in Aunt Bethany's book?"

"Uhm, no, because it was in the section about girls doing stuff with themselves."

"You can say 'masturbating'! But also there was stuff in the section about what two girls can do. Did you skip that?"

"Uh, yeah, and the one about what gay guys do. I don't even want to think about it!"

"I bet you'll like watching me with Lauren!" I declared.

"I guess," Peter replied.

"Would you do it with me and another guy?"

"That would be really weird," Peter said. "And there is no way I'm touching another guy! Gross!"

I almost rolled my eyes, but didn't. I understood not wanting to do it, but it wasn't gross.

"You wouldn't have to touch the other guy! I could do it with you at the same time!"

"How?"

"Mouth and pussy, of course!" I giggled.

Or butt and pussy, but I didn't want to scare Peter away.

"And," I teased, "guess where I could put the personal massager!"

"You wouldn't!" he gasped, figuring it out.

"Not if you told me not to do it."

"Don't. Can't we just have regular sex?"

"Yes, of course! Get naked!"

Peter put the vibrator on the nightstand and started taking off his clothes.

 Steve

"I have all the paperwork from the bankruptcy court," Liz said, coming into my office late on Tuesday morning. "I'll have it scanned into the system then put it in the offsite archives unless you want to read them first."

"If there is drier reading than a final decree in a bankruptcy case, I'm not sure what it would be! Did we get the assignment of copyrights from the bank?"

"Yes. We can truly put this one to bed. The rest is up to the criminal courts, and we don't have any part in any of that at this point, given the Brauns are pleading out and the charges against Clay are for attempted murder."

"Anything else I need to worry about?"

"Besides the crazy blonde who usually sits next to you?"

"I HEARD THAT!" Penny exclaimed, coming back into the office.

"Liz is not wrong," I chuckled.

"Steve?" Kimmy said over the intercom. "Sorry to interrupt, but I have Doctor Krajick on the line."

I rolled my eyes because if Bethany had used her title speaking to Kimmy, that meant she wasn't calling to reconcile.

"I'll take it in the «yōshitsu» room so Penny doesn't have to leave."

"I'll head back to my office," Liz said.

She left, and I went to the «yōshitsu» room and shut the door. A few seconds later, the phone buzzed, and I picked up the handset.

"Steve Adams."

"Steve, it's Bethany. Do you have a moment?"

"Yes," I replied, having to fight to avoid reflexively adding 'Sweetheart'.

"What will it take for you to allow me to revise my book?"

"Your way or my way?"

"My way," Bethany said.

"There is nothing on this planet that will convince me to allow you to wreck the most sex-positive book for teenagers I've ever read. Nothing."

"Thinking has evolved on that."

"Prudish American thinking. You lived in Sweden for a year, for Pete's sake!"

"You simply won't accept the cultural differences are important."

"That's both true and not true. While there are cultural differences, ours should move towards theirs. Your book, in its current incarnation, strikes exactly the right balance, and I'll be damned if I'll let it be changed to match your 'evolved' ideas about consent, which are actually a regression. As I said in Michigan, your 'evolved' thinking precludes anyone except two naïve virgins born on the exact same day and year from ever having sex."

"That's a slippery-slope argument and you know it!"

"And that's a claim made by people who do not want to admit the logical conclusions drawn about their positions which they cannot defend. Let me ask you this -- setting aside the law, could Birgit at fourteen ask a man in his thirties to deflower her?"

"Of course not!"

"Late twenties?"

"No."

"Remember who we're talking about here," I said. "A teen who is better informed about sex and sexuality than most adults. How about a college kid?"

"The age disparity is a problem."

"Uh-huh. High School Senior, who's the class stud?"

"Possibly, but it would be a bad idea."

"Bullshit! Do you honestly think it would be healthy for Birgit to be with a fumbling, clueless boy for her first time?"

"You're putting words in my mouth."

"No, I'm not. I asked you a question which you didn't answer. Let me approach it from a different direction. Describe an appropriate lover for Birgit's deflowering, assuming it hasn't already happened."

"As if she wouldn't tell you!"

"You'd be surprised," I replied. "But answer the question."

"Someone of the appropriate age with similar life experience."

"So, as I said, basically someone born on May 28, 1988, who was raised the same way I raised her. An empty set. If the guy were younger or had less experience,

you'd say he couldn't consent. If he were older and had more experience, you'd say she couldn't consent. Maybe 'exact birthdate' is extreme, but it's not far off! Under your standard, I *raped* you Bethany, because you could NOT consent to have sex with the class stud."

"That's not fair!" Bethany exclaimed angrily.

"And that's not a denial, either. In your mind, I raped Kara, and close to two hundred other girls, and Jennie McGrath raped me because I couldn't consent as a relatively clueless virgin to the widowed twenty-three-year-old woman. There is no escaping those conclusions. And this is NOT about me wanting to have sex with teenagers. My thinking there has evolved, though not for the reasons yours has, nor does it involve me believing they aren't able to consent to sex."

"Right. Because you'd EVER accept a position that posited that was wrong."

"Again, you'd be surprised. But you don't care because you have your mind made up and you've decided that teens should not have sex, and, in fact, logically, neither should college students if one is experienced and the other is not. That's nuts, Bethany, plain and simple.

"I'm sorry Samantha wasted her money and contacts to get you the fellowship because you didn't learn a damned thing. So my answer is 'no', and my 'no' to you is final. I won't lift a finger to change your publisher's mind and I'll continue to buy and distribute those books far and wide. If and when you come to your senses, call me. Until then, take care of yourself."

There was silence for about ten seconds, so I replaced the receiver, left the «yōshitsu» room, and returned to my desk. Twenty-five minutes later, Kimmy let me know Kathy Will was on the line, so once again I went to the «yōshitsu» room to take the call.

"Hi, Red!" I exclaimed.

"Hi, Steve. Before I get to the real reason for my call, you shocked me!"

I laughed, "Well, Kristin made a good, logical argument!"

"And you're OK with it?"

"Given no other guy will ever see that, yeah, actually, I am! But neither you nor your husband are off the hook for *yours!*"

"You're too much!"

"That shouldn't be news. How is Bethany?"

"Angry and upset. If she's telling the truth, you were pretty rough on her."

"I was. I used the one word that I knew would pierce her right into her soul."

"That's what upset her so much."

"You know I wasn't wrong, even if I was terribly insensitive. But you know what she'd say about Kristin, despite the fact that Kristin approached me, arranged it, and spent a year teasing me before it happened!"

"Oh, I know! Trust me! Kristin kept me very well informed. And I'm jealous! At fifteen, she's done something I've never done!"

"Not my problem!" I chuckled. "Take that up with your husband!"

"I still can't believe you let two fifteen-year-old girls do that to you!"

"How long have you known me, Kathy?"

"Never mind!" she replied, laughing softly.

"I hope you aren't calling to get me to change my mind about the book."

"Heavens no! I agree with you completely about the book. It's the word you used. Bethany is sure to tell Tom, and he's not going to take it well."

I took a deep breath and let it out, then said, "Something I should have considered before I said it to her. I was frustrated because I wasn't getting through to her and she dismissed everything she learned in Sweden as 'cultural differences'."

"Oh, I know, and I totally understand; Tom won't."

"There isn't much I can do about it at this point except wait for him to call or show up at my door. I could apologize to Bethany for using the word, but the concept is sound and she needs to understand the implications of her views. Maybe nobody else will call her out for her bullshit, but I sure will."

"I hear you."

"And please tell me she doesn't know about Kristin."

"Kristin certainly didn't tell her, and I haven't."

"Neither have I, and the Neighborhood Watch wouldn't."

Kathy laughed, "Birgit, right?"

"And Ashley, though Ashley is crafty, while Birgit is obvious."

"Watch out for the crafty one!" Kathy declared mirthfully.

"Tell me about it!" I chuckled. "Anyway, hopefully Tom will understand."

"Hopefully. See you on Monday at the party!"

"See you then."

I hung up and went back to my desk, knowing that at some point in the next day or two, I'd have a confrontation with Tom, something I did not relish.

 Jesse

"We're looking solid," I said to the guys as Pete, Jack, Freddie, Tomás, DeShawn, Nicholas and I chowed down on pizza at Bacino's, where we all went after hockey practice.

"Think we're ready for Saint Rita in two weeks?" Pete asked.

"We should be," I replied. "The team is coming together pretty well."

"It's different without Tim, Lee, and Kwame," Freddie said. "But we have some good replacements right here at the table!"

"What was Coach talking to you about, Pete?" Tomás asked.

"Which games I'll play. I start twice during the regular season. This year against De La Salle and Mount Carmel."

"Have you ever needed a backup, Jesse?" DeShawn asked.

"So far, no injuries or sickness, though I did get a rest in the third period of the game last year against Fenwick when we were up six goals. Something similar happened during Freshman year when Jerry came in after we scored five in the first against Chicago Latin."

"Can I ask what happened last year?" DeShawn inquired.

"Exactly what coach said," I replied. "We lost focus, took six penalties in the first period, and never recovered. And they weren't bullshit penalties, either. We had two five-on-three disadvantages, and that was the difference. Then they trapped us and we couldn't get a goal."

"That's why coach is so keen on beating the trap," Pete said.

"The NHL is considering ditching the two-line pass rule," I said. "That would basically kill the effectiveness of the neutral-zone trap because you could pass from your defensive zone across the red line. Originally, you couldn't ever pass forward, but that changed in 1927 when you could make a forward pass in your zone and the neutral zone, but not in the offensive zone.

"It changed again in 1929 when they allowed forward passes in all zones, but you had to carry the puck across the opponent's blue line. The center line wasn't introduced until 1944, when you were allowed to pass over your own blue line up to the center line. That's when the two-line pass rule came into effect. We need to ditch it to stop teams playing the trap because it makes for boring hockey."

"I thought goalies liked fewer shots," DeShawn said.

"I hate boring hockey even more!" I declared. "Watching a game where a team is trapping is like watching paint dry!"

"Who do you think wins the Cup?"

"The fucking Devils by fucking playing their fucking trap!" I growled. "The Ducks should have a good year. The Penguins will suck! They might be the worst team in the league this year!"

"Why are you so happy about that?" Tomás asked.

"Jesse's dad is a huge Penguins fan!" Nicholas declared. "Huge! So when they stink, Jesse is very happy!"

"What he said!" I grinned.

We finished our pizza, then Nicholas and I headed home.

 Birgit

Peter left after lunch and I went to Lilibeth's house to hang out with her, Libby, and Rachel.

"Only a few days of summer vacation left," Libby complained.

"I like school," I said. "My complaint is that most of my friends won't be in the same school!"

"That would be true even if you went to Kenwood Academy, right?" Libby asked.

"Not quite so bad, but half the girls are going to parochial schools like Maria. Rachel, did you find an apartment yet?"

"Samantha found one for me, and I could actually move in on September 1st, but because I'm not eighteen, it's better to stay at Samantha's. I'll start decorating and stuff, and you girls can help."

"Cool!" I exclaimed.

"You need a big bed!" Libby exclaimed.

Rachel laughed, "Already planned! A queen! Plenty of room for me and Javon!"

"He's moving in with you, right?" Libby asked.

"Yes. He started at Chicago Theological Seminary yesterday."

"He's going to be a pastor?" Lilibeth asked.

"No," Rachel replied. "He's going to get a PhD in theology and teach and write."

The doorbell rang and Lilibeth went to answer it and returned with Tiffany and Naomi.

"We're all here," Libby declared. "Let's go for ice cream!"

Unsurprisingly, nobody objected.

 Steve

A visibly angry Tom was waiting for me on the porch when my wives, daughters, and I returned from the dojo on Tuesday evening. I invited him to my study, offered him a drink which he refused.

"What you said to Bethany was totally out of line," he said, balling his fists.

I was positive that if I wasn't a karate instructor, he would have tried to hit me.

"I'm not sure what you want me to do or say," I replied. "She called me, not the other way around. I characterized *my* actions based on her theory. I didn't accuse her."

"Steve, you can't say that to her! You, of all people, ought to know that!"

"Did Bethany tell you that she didn't deny what I said?" I asked.

"No."

"It's true. She said it wasn't 'fair', but in the past she'd have adamantly rejected the idea. Claiming my statement wasn't fair was an admission it was *accurate*. I think the only thing left to do at this point is to refuse to speak to her. I didn't call her, and I haven't tried to speak to her."

"I think you owe her an apology," Tom said firmly.

"To what end?" I asked. "She won't accept it. She believes I have a single agenda, and that agenda is the only reason I object to what she's saying. That's not true, and it has never been true. As I told her when she made that claim, and others, that she'd be surprised. The thing is, she didn't even *ask*, which she would have done in the past. I can say the words, but she'll know they aren't heartfelt, and even if they were, she'd reject them unless I admitted she was correct, which I can *never* do."

"You could allow her to revise her book."

I shook my head, "No. Things are bad enough as it is in society, and her book is the only sex-positive book for teens. An official revision or rejection would do grave harm to the teens that book is designed to help."

"She's going to update the website for the book."

"The one she controls, yes. The publisher's? No."

"It is her work."

"And she signed away her rights. That's how it works for the programmers at NIKA, too. All of their intellectual property belongs to NIKA. And before you say it's different, Bethany could have chosen to self-publish or found a publisher who would allow her to retain the rights. But we're going around in circles. Your wife completely missed the point of going to Sweden, and while she's free to hold whatever opinion she wishes, opinions, like speech, have consequences.

"At this point, all I can do is suggest you speak with Kathy. You'll find she agrees, generally, with me. The other thing, and I want to reiterate this, is that Bethany needs to leave the kids out of this. Interfering with Jesse's or Albert's relationship with Nicholas, or Stephie's, once she decides he's not the Antichrist, won't be tolerated."

"You don't get to decide that, Steve!" Tom protested.

"No, I don't, but I, and the other parents, do have a say, as do my kids. I can't stop you from forbidding your kids to see mine, but you'll have a heck of a time explaining to Nicholas why he can't play hockey for the school team if he's required to stay away from Jesse. And I want to be clear, I will *not* tell Jesse to keep his opinions to himself. I haven't said anything to my kids, so if they find out, it's from Nicholas, Bobby, you, or Bethany."

"You really are an asshole," Tom growled.

"That may well be true," I replied, "but that doesn't change the facts."

"Don't expect us this weekend," he said angrily.

"You're all welcome, but it's your choice."

Tom shook his head, turned, and left without another word. I heard the door slam and went to the 'Indian' room to join my wives.

"I suspect that didn't go well," Kara said.

"It didn't, and it couldn't have. The problem is that Bethany's entire field has moved from what I'd call a neutral position to a sex-negative position, mirroring the prudes in society. She has, in effect, become my mom."

"Now that's low!" Jessica exclaimed.

"I don't know what else to say," I replied. "What do you think she'd say about someone like Tabitha, who was nineteen?"

"She'd object."

"And yet..."

"Oh, I know!" Jessica declared. "Tabitha's situation paralleled Kara's, though you were quite a bit older than Tabitha compared to when you were with Kara."

"But Bethany's objection would still apply," Suzanne interjected. "For her, Steve being the school stud meant he abused Kara!"

"As if!" Kara declared. "He told me *exactly* what would happen if I kissed him a second time and warned me not to do it! The same was true for going on dates! And Tabitha said he warned her, too, though he was way more explicit with Tabitha than with me."

"Because you couldn't wait to get your panties off!" Jessica declared.

"Perhaps," Kara replied primly. "Let's go upstairs and I'll take them off!"

"That sounds like a grand idea!" I declared.



August 28, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"My mom and Tom were really angry last night," Nicholas said when I picked him up for hockey practice on Wednesday morning.

"If it's about my dad, I think it's best if we totally stay out of it. Your mom didn't say you couldn't spend time with me, did she?"

"No. How would that even work with hockey? She and Tom both work, so I need rides from you for practice."

"Parents aren't always rational," I replied.

"Yours are!" Nicholas protested.

"Right! Not being able to drive the Lexus or the Acura, but allowed to drive the BMW coupe, sedan, and SUV? Tell me my moms are rational!"

Nicholas laughed, "OK, about one thing! What else?"

"They expect hugs!" I declared with a grin.

"Don't all moms?"

"Yes! You should see Albert when Aunt Jess expects a hug. It's like he's going before a firing squad! But with your mom and my dad, I think if we just mind our own business, we'll be OK. I'm pretty sure that in the end, they'll work it out."

"Will you pick me up for practice next Tuesday?"

"Yes. I'll be at your house at 4:25am. Be on the porch, so I don't have to ring the bell."

"OK."

"I've never had to get up so early in my life!" Nicholas complained.

"Get used to it!" I replied. "You have four years and we mostly only have early morning practice. I wish the school had their own rink, but very few schools do."

"What time do you go to bed?"

"By 9:00pm most nights. That way I get at least seven hours' sleep. Sometimes I'll go to bed at 8:00pm if I get my homework done. On weekends, I get more, and I take naps some days after school."

Though I hadn't the previous school year because I had the «Filles du jour», as my moms had called them.

"Just when I get a later bedtime, I have to go to bed early!"

"Because you want to play hockey! Which would you rather do? Go to bed later or play?"

"Play!"

"Me, too!"

 Albert

WarriorChick: Hi! Ready for this weekend?

CmdrAlbert: Yes! I called grandpa, and he's expecting us. I also got in touch with Joseph and Krissy.

WarriorChick: Cool! My dad will meet us at the airport, and will have a car for us to use.

CmdrAlbert: I'll drive!

WarriorChick: LOL! Not a chance! You know the rules.

CmdrAlbert: So dumb that I can fly the plane but not drive a car!

WarriorChick: They let twenty-year-olds run nuclear reactors and eighteen-year-olds fire missiles and arm planes!

CmdrAlbert: Don't rub it in! What time on Saturday?

WarriorChick: Be at Meigs by 10:00am.

CmdrAlbert: Wilco! You know Mayor Daley is still trying to close the field, right?

WarriorChick: Yes. I know some fighter jocks who would happily strafe his house if need be!

CmdrAlbert: Sign me up!

WarriorChick: See you Saturday!

CmdrAlbert: Cool. Albert out!

I closed my IM and went to my flight simulator setup and brought up the correct aircraft model and readied myself for a flight from Meigs to Cincinnati. I was hoping Aimee would allow me to taxi and take off, but I wasn't sure I could convince her.

 Steve

Late on Wednesday morning I went to a meeting of the NIKA Technology Committee, of which I was a member, along with Sam, Liz, Cindi, Elyse, Débora, Cèlia, Eve, and Jeannette from Chicago, as well as Andy from Los Angeles, Skye from Colorado Springs, and John from Pittsburgh.

"Brenda is going to sit in the meeting today," Sam, who chaired the meetings, said. "Did everyone read through the proposal?"

There were assents from the room and over the speaker phone. The proposal was for a complete restructuring of our corporate WAN as well as replacing our aging AT&T Merlin system with Cisco IP telephones. The original proposal, circulated in April, had proposed a move from InfoNet to WorldCom, but with WorldCom's accounting scandal, an alternative of using Sprint was now on the table..

"I think the first order of business is the WAN proposal," Sam said. "Liz's advice is not to pursue anything with MCI WorldCom until their bankruptcy is complete."

"I agree," I said. "We can't take that risk, and it's possible the corporation could be broken up and sold off in pieces. We also don't know what will come of the SEC allegations and potential criminal charges. It's toxic."

"Sam, this is John. What's the rationale for the order of the offices?"

"Twofold," Sam replied. "First, VLC has Siemens equipment that we absolutely want to ditch as soon as possible. Doing them first makes perfect sense, and will save us money. The main Call Manager Node would be installed in Chicago at the start, but I felt doing VLC, then Athena, made more sense. They are basically stand alone and that gives us a chance to work the kinks out of the system before we convert the NIKA offices. The same would be true for the WAN -- switch them first, work out the kinks, then Colorado Springs, Pittsburgh, Durham, Dallas, and Los Angeles."

"Elyse," I said, "what does this do to the financials?"

"Worried about your bonus?" she asked with a smile.

"You know better than that!"

"Of course I do. This would consume a significant portion of our capital reserves, so I'd plan to draw on the line of credit. That will allow us to spread the cost over time, which I prefer over trying to depreciate the equipment, because PBXs have a fifty-year depreciation term."

"That made sense in the sixties!" I said shaking my head. "I'm OK with that."

"I know how important it is to you to protect profit sharing and bonuses," Elyse replied. "We should see a reduction in overall communication charges, too."

"Any other questions?" Sam asked.

There weren't any.

"I'm going to recommend to the Executive Committee that we proceed with this plan," Sam said. "Brenda will manage it together with Eve. The next item on the agenda is the upgrade of the servers for next year."



August 30, 2002, Chicago, Illinois 🎤 Jesse

I had just arrived home from hockey practice on Friday when there was a knock at the back door. I wasn't expecting anyone, as Angelina wasn't going to come over until 3:00pm. When I opened the door, I was surprised to see Brooke.

"Hi!" she exclaimed. "Are you busy?"

"I was just about to make lunch," I said. "You're welcome to join me if you want."

"Sure! I tried calling earlier, but I got the machine. I guessed you were at practice so I didn't leave a message and decided to just come by."

I let her in and we went to the kitchen where I started making BLT sandwiches for both of us.

"I'm single again," Brooke said.

"What happened to the guy you were seeing?"

"His family moved to Wisconsin. We broke up, and I was wondering if you might want to integrate!"

"Angelina will be here around 3:00pm and I need to head to O'Hare at 4:30pm," I said. "So we'd have a couple of hours after lunch, if that works for you."

"It does!"

"You need a clean STI test," I replied.

"Duh! I have one! And I'm religious about my pills, so no worries on either front!"

"Cool."

"Some of the girls and I will be at your hockey games. Maybe you can introduce them to the guys."

"The guys will appreciate it!"

"How were Sweden and Russia?"

"Awesome! I saw some old friends and made some new ones, too."

"I bet!" Brooke smirked.

"How was your summer?"

"Good. I went to math camp."

"I bet that was a thrill a minute," I said.

"Hey, I like math!" Brooke protested.

"To each their own!"

I finished making the sandwiches, added a dill pickle spear to each plate, then added Fritos. I got two Cokes from the fridge, and we sat down to eat. We both ate quickly, cleaned up the kitchen, then went up to my room to spend two hours integrating.

Brooke left when Angelina arrived, and after Angelina and I fooled around for an hour, she helped me pack for my weekend in DC, then walked with me to the train. We hugged and kissed, and I boarded the train which would take me into the Loop where I'd board the Blue Line L for O'Hare.



August 30, 2002, Washington, DC

"Hi!" Larisa exclaimed when I walked into the arrivals hall at Dulles Airport in Washington.

We hugged under the watchful eye of her father, General Dmitry, so I was careful not to hug her too tightly. Her birthday was in six days, and she'd be fourteen, but I couldn't imagine General Dmitry being OK with even a kiss at that point.

"Hi, Jesse Stephen!" General Dmitry said.

"Good evening, Comrade General!" I declared formally.

He laughed, "You and your father are exactly the same!"

We shook hands.

"Mom is at home waiting for us," Larisa said, taking my hand. "Do you have another bag?"

"No; just the carry on."

We walked hand-in-hand, following General Dmitry to a private Mercedes, rather than an embassy car, which had been the case in the past. Larisa and I sat in the back seat, and because of traffic, it took nearly an hour from the time we

backed out of the parking spot until we walked into the townhome in Alexandria.

"Hi, Jesse!" Larisa's mom exclaimed.

"Good evening, Comrade Trade Attaché!" I smirked.

"Oh, stop!" she said, laughing. "You and your father are both goofballs! Please call me Tatyana Ivanovna!"

"Dad loves to tease Yekatarina Sergeyevna that way!" I declared.

"He does! How is your father?"

"He's good. He's busy with work and karate."

"We have you in the same guest room as before."

"Thanks," I replied.

"Please put your bag in your room, then join me in my study," General Dmitry said.

I did as he asked, and two minutes later we were alone in his study. He poured a tiny amount of vodka into a glass and handed it to me.

"«За Ваше здоровье!»" he declared.

"Cheers!" I replied.

We drank, and even the tiny amount of vodka burned all the way down, just as it had when I was in Saint Petersburg.

"I heard you enjoyed your time in Saint Petersburg!" he declared. "And made some new friends."

"I did," I replied carefully.

"Very good! Friendship between our two nations is far better than being enemies! We must work together to make that happen!"

"Absolutely!" I agreed.

"As for friends here, do not forget that Larisa is my daughter, and is to be treated with respect."

"Of course," I replied. "I would never do anything to disrespect her!"

"Good!"



August 31, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Albert

"Would you allow me to taxi and take off?" I asked when Aimee got into the plane after we completed the pre-flight checks at Meigs Field on Saturday morning.

"You think you're ready for that?"

"I practiced two hours every day this week on my simulator, I read the theory in the book you gave me, I know the procedures, and I've watched you do it at least twenty times."

"If you can execute a perfect taxi, while handling the radio, I'll allow you to take off, but you have to follow my exact instructions, and be prepared for me to take over."

"Yes, Ma'am!" I declared.

"Then go ahead."

I keyed the radio, "Meigs tower, Archer 2565M, ramp, VFR to Blue Ash, 4500, southbound departure."

"Archer 2565M, cleared for departure; taxi to runway."

"Archer 2565M," I replied.

I carefully advanced the throttle and released the brakes, allowing the plane to move forward. It was a simple, almost direct route to the end of the runway, and I had no trouble positioning the aircraft for departure.

"Meigs tower, Archer 2565M, ready for takeoff."

"Archer 2565M, cleared for takeoff. Traffic 2500 two miles east in the pattern."

"Archer 2565M," I replied.

I set the control surfaces for takeoff, advanced the throttle, and released the brakes, ensuring I kept the nosewheel on the center line, watching my speed. I

quickly reached the rotation speed and pulled back on the yoke, bringing the nosewheel into the air, and shortly after, becoming airborne.

"Very nice," Aimee said. "Take us to Cincinnati!"

 Birgit

My first match of the tournament was against a female brown belt who was sixteen. I won fairly easily, but my second match against a fifteen-year-old boy was tougher. I won, but it was a very close thing. After the second match, Dad and I agreed to have lunch at a diner near the Loyola Fieldhouse. Because he was tournament director, he felt it was better to only have lunch with me, than with the other students from the dojo, which was fine with me!

"Thanks for inviting me on a lunch date!" I said as we walked to the diner.

"Keep dreaming, Pumpkin!"

"I meant lunch, Dad. YOU went straight to sex!"

Dad laughed, "Because you tease me that way all the time!"

"Perhaps!" I said primly.

"Now you sound just like your mom!"

"Just a younger, sexier version!"

"I thought you didn't do drugs!" Dad chuckled.

"I don't! But it's true!"

"Uh-huh. How were your matches?"

"The first one was easy, and I won 3-0. The second one was tougher, and I won 3-2. My next match is against a seventeen-year-old guy, and I'm concerned."

"Just do your best," I said.

"I want to practice with you now that you can spar."

"We can do that."

"And if I beat you, you'll pin me to the mat?" I teased.

"Behave!"

"You're just no fun, Dad! Just no fun at all!"

"So Penny tells me just about every day!"

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Albert

"Hi, Dad!" Aimee exclaimed when we walked up to her dad's car.

"Hi, Honey! Hello, Albert!"

"Hi, Mr. Shaughnessy!"

"Albert was pilot flying for the entire flight," Aimee said.

"He made that perfect landing?" Mr. Shaughnessy asked.

"He did. We absolutely have to help him get into the Academy and then get jets!"

"I know some people," Mr. Shaughnessy said. "And I know Albert's dad has some powerful friends as well."

We tossed our bags into the back of his black SUV and headed to his house where Aimee and I switched our bags to his red Dodge Viper.

"Now I really want to drive!" I declared.

"This car might be a bit much for you to handle as your first car!"

"Says my daughter with the lead foot!" Mr. Shaughnessy declared. "Keep it to the speed limit, Honey."

"Yes, Dad. Albert, let's go see your grandpa."

"Sounds great!"

XVII. Necessary Changes

August 31, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Well, that stunk," I said to Dad as we left the Fieldhouse.

"What did you in?"

"He was more than a foot taller, and I couldn't get close to him no matter what I tried."

"We'll work on that when we spar," I replied. "You just have to move like a cat!"

"It's always about the pu..."

"DO NOT SAY IT!" Dad ordered, but he was laughing.

"You're just no fun, Dad!"

"And you need to be careful about how much you tease, especially outside the house. I know nobody is in earshot, but all it takes is one mistake."

"Sorry."

"How did you do with your kata?"

"No mistakes that I'm aware of. I think I have a good shot at getting a medal."

"You're absolutely ready for your black belt," Dad said.

"Do you mean all-around?" I asked.

"You're mature and disciplined, even when you're a scamp!"

"I have to have fun, Dad!"

"I know! Anyway, you can discuss convening a black belt board with «Shihan» Will any time you're ready."

"I'll talk to him next weekend," I said. "Who will be on the board?"

"Sensei Molly for sure, and someone from Sensei Ichirou's dojo."

"I need you to work with me on the black belt kata as well as on sparring," I said. "So I think I'll ask for sometime in November."

"Whenever you're ready," Dad said. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Peter and I are hanging out with Rachel and Javon. Rachel is sending a car to get us."

"Sounds good!"

 Steve

I arrived home just in time to walk with Kara and Suzanne to get Jessica from the hospital.

"What's the plan for tonight?" Jessica asked.

"Just relaxing at home," I said. "There really isn't anything interesting playing at the theater, and the kids will all be out doing one thing or another."

"Did Albert make it safely to Cincinnati?"

"Yes. He called around 3:30pm from my dad's house."

And told me he'd handled the entire flight, but I decided it was better if he told Jess *after* he came home, rather than have her worry about him all weekend.

"How did Birgit do?"

"Won her first two matches but lost her third one to a guy who was more than a foot taller. I'll work with her on techniques as she's not going to be six feet tall like Jesse and like we expect Albert to be."

"Anything else happen today?"

"No. How about at the hospital?"

"Just a usual Saturday for us. I'm looking forward to teaching in the classroom again starting next week."

"And I'm looking forward to the seminars!"

"What's for dinner?" Jessica asked.

"Something Japanese," I replied. "Yuriko has taken over the kitchen again!"

"Sounds yummy!"

"She certainly is!" I declared, causing my wives to laugh.



September 1, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Morning, Dad!" I exclaimed, coming into the sunroom on Sunday morning.

"Morning, Pumpkin! We'll leave about 7:30am for the tournament."

I really didn't want to go to the second day of the tournament because I wasn't competing, but I had to because there was a very good chance I'd receive a medal for kata. What made it worse was that I couldn't hang out with Dad because he was the Tournament Director and nobody was allowed near his lectern. That said, I got to ride with him, and we would have lunch together, which added to my time with him.

"OK. It's going to be kind of boring."

"You're there supporting the others who are competing, including Jolene and Sarah."

"I know."

"And you have a good chance of winning a medal," Dad said. "You were still in first place at the end of yesterday, and there are only about a dozen competitors today."

"I'm just that good!" I giggled. "I have ALL the moves!"

"For kata, I agree! For the other stuff, I'll take your word for it!"

"I am my mom's daughter!" I declared.

"That would frighten mere mortals," Dad said. "Fortunately, I am not a mere mortal!"

"The girls do all say 'Oh God!' to you!" I giggled.

"Pumpkin..." Dad warned.

"Sorry," I said. "It's fun to tease you."

"You are NOT sorry!" Dad exclaimed. "But you do need to dial it back."

"I'm careful to only tease when we're alone," I protested.

"Yes, but you have a history of not having a filter between your brain and your mouth. All it would take is one slip-up and DCFS would be investigating our family."

"I know," I sighed. "I'll do better."

"You're a wonderful daughter, Pumpkin. Part of growing up is learning when it's appropriate to say things and when it isn't. Trust me, I learned that lesson the hard way growing up."

"You're talking about Grandma Adams?"

"Yes. I said some very ill-considered things to her that made my life worse. Fortunately, nothing that would get Family Services involved, but things I should never had said. I did some ill-considered things, too, at least with regard to her."

"Like?"

"Spending the night with your mom at her parents' house after we made love the first time. That set my mom on the warpath."

"Mom told me the story! Your mom called Mom a slut even though she'd only ever had sex with you! I've had sex with more guys than Mom!"

"Interesting revelation, Pumpkin!"

"Oh, please! You know I was with Kjell and you know I've been with Peter. Right there is TWICE as many as Mom!"

"Good point," Dad chuckled. "Are you ready for school on Tuesday?"

"Yes. Suzanne took us to Target to get our supplies. I'm still not happy I was *told* I had to go to the Lab School instead of Mom asking me."

"I thought we were past that," Dad said.

"We are. I won't say anything to her, I'm just annoyed that I didn't get to have any say!"

"I totally understand, but guess what? I have to do things I'm told without any input! And I complain as much as you do, if not more!"

"Liz! I exclaimed. "How is it that you do *everything* she tells you?!"

"Worse, Pumpkin, I pay her to tell me what to do."

"Where do I sign up for that?" I asked.

"It doesn't work for daughters."

"Hah! I bet it would work for Ashley!"

"That would be because she's not impetuous!" Dad declared.

"Breakfast, Steve-san!" Yuriko called from the door to the sunroom.

"Be right there," Dad replied.

I got three more minutes of cuddling before we went to the kitchen for breakfast.

[Washington, DC]

 Jesse

"The next time you visit will be in Boston," Larisa said as we ate breakfast on Sunday morning.

"When do you move?" I asked.

"Dad and I will move into the new house as soon as school is out in December; Mom will move in January when the new Trade Attaché arrives."

"Are you happy to move to Boston?"

"Yes. I've done everything there is to do in Washington and there is so much history and so much to do in Boston. You should come visit soon!"

"Over Christmas, we have a tournament in Canada," I replied. "Maybe you and your parents could come."

"Where, Jesse Stephen?" General Dmitry asked, coming into the kitchen.

"Toronto," I replied. "Dad will have the details. There are enough rooms blocked out for us that I'm sure you can get a reservation. Dad's travel agent, Liesel, handled everything. I can give you her direct line."

"Please do! Lara, remember the rules for your party today."

She was having her fourteenth birthday part a few days early to have it on a weekend, and also so I could attend.

"Yes, Dad," Larisa replied.

General Dmitry poured himself some coffee, then left the kitchen.

"What rules?" I asked.

"Nobody is allowed in the bedrooms," she replied. "No drugs and no alcohol."

"Are those really problems?" I asked.

"Not my friends, but there have been problems at the school with drug dealing."

"Same at my school," I replied. "And gangs. But they don't mess with anyone on the hockey team."

"I bet!" Larisa exclaimed. "How is hockey going?"

"We have our first game in two weeks, and I just mentioned the tournament. How is football?"

Larisa laughed, "I have to call it 'soccer' because most of the kids don't know that you play football with your feet, not your hands! We've just had practice so far, same as you."

"A school team?"

"Yes."

"Where will you go to school in Boston?"

"We'll actually live in Weston, and I'll go to Concord Academy. Dad will keep the studio apartment he has in Hannover so he could stay rather than make the commute if he has an evening engagement."

"Grandpa Adams went to Dartmouth, but he graduated in 1939, and studied electrical engineering."

"Have you considered going there for college?"

"Not really. They do have a Division I hockey team, so it's an option, though I think I'll go to UW Madison. But I'm not sure I'll go out for the school team. I'll figure that out in a year or so."

"Why?"

"I'm good, but not good enough to make the NHL. If you think about it, there are only about sixty players, drawn from the entire globe, who play goalie in the NHL. That's fewer spots than getting into the Naval Academy, which is what Albert wants to do. And the Naval Academy mostly only draws from the US."

"There are plenty of spots for football players in professional leagues everywhere but the US. Well, for boys. For girls, not really."

"That's true for hockey, too, though only the NHL really pays well. But I'd prefer to work as a scout or in the front office of an NHL team than play in a minor league."

"Do you think you could?"

"My dad and his friends have lots of contacts, which is the key to getting your foot in the door almost anywhere."

"Mom says that's the most important thing she has -- her contact list."

"My dad was on it!" I grinned.

Larisa laughed, "I've heard some stories from Mom, but better ones from Mrs. Anisimova!"

"And here I thought the KGB kept secrets!" I exclaimed.

"She's not in the KGB anymore! They don't even exist now! But I think Mrs. Anisimova likes telling stories about my mom when she was a teenager!"

"I get those stories about Mom One from Dad, Aunt Kara, Aunt Bethany, and Aunt Kathy!"

"None of those are really your aunts, right?"

"That's right. The only actual aunt I see regularly is my dad's sister, Stephanie. Mom One was an only child and Mom Two's sister doesn't visit. I haven't seen her since I was little."

"Why?"

"They don't really approve of my moms, and Mom Two's family wanted her to have kids. Even her parents don't visit much."

"I don't see my Russian relatives very often, except for Grandpa Vanya and Grandma Anya."

We finished eating and went to the living room to hang out until the Larisa's friends arrived.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"What's your name?" a cute boy asked while I waited for Jolene's championship match to begin.

"Birgit! What's yours?"

"Blane Chapman. Which dojo do you attend?"

"JK Martial Arts in Hyde Park. You?"

"AK Martial Arts in Naperville. What grade are you?"

"Freshman, on Tuesday. You?"

"Freshman, but at North Central. You look a lot older than fourteen!"

"Thanks! When did you earn your black belt?"

"In June. When will you test for yours?"

"Whenever I decide. I had thought about doing it this Summer, but I decided to wait so I could compete in this tournament as a brown belt."

"How did you do?"

"I won my first two matches, but lost my third one to a boy who is way taller."

"You are kind of short," he teased.

"Hey!" I protested. "I'm only about four inches shorter than you are, and remember, good things come in small packages!"

"And if you were two or three years older..."

"Give me a break!" I growled. "I am not a baby! I'm a woman!"

"You're a fourteen-year-old girl! I'm almost nineteen!"

"So?" I asked, annoyed. "I am most decidedly NOT a little girl! Ask me out and you'll see!"

"Right!" he said, shaking his head. "Your dad is going to be cool with that! I don't *think* so!"

I rolled my eyes, "You have no idea! He's here, so you could talk to him and see that he'd be OK with it."

"Uh-huh," Blane replied.

"He is here. Right over there!"

I pointed to the Tournament Directors' lectern where Dad was standing.

"Do you think I have a death wish?!" Blane exclaimed. "He's 6th Dan!"

"And he's a pussy cat," I replied. "Let's make a bet, OK? I go ask him if I can go out with you. If he says 'yes', you have to take me on a date and do what I want. If he says 'no', then I'll leave you alone."

"As if!" he declared, shaking his head.

"Do we have a bet? Or are you afraid you'll lose?"

"My parents would flip if I went out with a fourteen-year-old girl!"

"Coward!" I declared.

"Seriously, Birgit, you're too young."

"Grr," I growled and moved away from him.

I was thoroughly annoyed that even guys who were eighteen wouldn't think about going out with me, let alone doing anything else. I wasn't a little girl, I was a woman! Society was doing its level best of stop teenagers from having sex, and it was annoying. I liked Peter, but I wanted someone like Mikael to fool around with, at least on occasion. He really knew what he was doing, and that was the best sex I'd had so far!

 Steve

"What's bugging you, Pumpkin?" I asked as we walked to the diner for lunch.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You look as if you're ready to go medieval on someone."

"BOYS!" Birgit grouched. "I talked to someone from a dojo in Naperville and he called me a 'little girl'!"

"And from the perspective of most people, that's what you are," I said. "You're going to have trouble changing minds for at least a few years."

"That's just wrong!" I protested. "You didn't do that! And you still don't!"

"I do have limits, which you know."

"But you think fifteen is OK!" Birgit exclaimed.

"And you're fourteen, Pumpkin," I said gently.

"And yet, you would have if it weren't for my moms!"

"That's actually not true. There are things about which you have no idea which impacted that decision, irrespective of your moms' opinion on the matter."

"But you won't tell me!"

"I can't, because, among other things, it would violate someone else's privacy. What I can say is that, among other reasons, your expectations made it difficult for it to be consensual."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In your mind, you wanted to displace your mom, and that could never happen."

"I didn't!" Birgit protested.

"All you wanted was an expert deflowering on your birthday and nothing more? Ever? Be honest."

"Well, no," Birgit admitted.

"So that's part of it. Not to mention the point I made about far too many people knowing about it."

"So, if I'd kept quiet and only wanted an expert deflowering?"

"I can't answer that because that Birgit didn't exist!"

"Humor me!" Birgit giggled.

"You and Liz!" I said, shaking my head. "No matter what else might be true, I had to consider how your moms would react, and there is no way you'd have kept quiet about it!"

"Grr!"

"I know you well enough, Pumpkin. Going back to your complaint, I'm sure you'll meet some guys at the Lab School."

"High School boys! What if I want a man?"

"That," I said, "is something I can't really help you with, and unfortunately, society is your enemy there."

"Maybe I'll move to Sweden!"

"And give up cuddles?"

"You fight dirty, Dad!"

"I have your number!"

[Washington, DC]

 Jesse

Larisa's friends began arriving around 11:00am and were an interesting group of kids, mostly children of diplomats, but a few Americans, too. It was cool to meet a bunch of kids from places I'd never been, including Egypt, South Africa, Greece, Turkey, and Hungary. The girl from Turkey was gorgeous and flirty, but I was careful not to flirt back because I didn't want to upset Larisa.

We had a feast for lunch, and then birthday cake and ice cream, and once Larisa had opened her gifts, we played games. At any party I held, there would be dancing, but I had the distinct impression that was something of which General Dmitry wouldn't approve, even if Larisa's mom would. I was sure that if I wanted to even think about kissing Larisa, it would have to be somewhere General Dmitry could not observe, or I'd be 'counting trees' if I was lucky, and receive my 'nine grams' if I wasn't!

When everyone left, Larisa and I went for a walk, and once we were out of sight of the townhouse, Larisa took my hand.

"You don't think your dad has spies all along our route?" I asked.

Larisa laughed, "Mom will keep him from shooting you for holding my hand!"

"I do prefer to stay alive! Do you think you'll be able to come to Toronto for the tournament?"

"I'm positive. Dad is always talking about the tour you did in Russia."

"Are you going to stay in the US?"

"I think so," Larisa replied. "I've lived here a long time, and I like it. And I don't think Mom or Dad plan to move back. Do you like Russia enough to move there?"

"No, but I like visiting."

And I liked the 'warm comradeship' there, as Marko Ramius had described Cuba in *The Hunt for Red October*. But there was no way I could say that to Larisa!

"Me, too," Larisa agreed. "What will you study at university?"

"Business and sports management. How about you?"

"I have no idea yet, but I have four years to decide! What time do you need to be at the airport tomorrow?"

"6:30am for my 8:30am flight."

"Ugh. That means leaving here around 5:45am! But I'll get up to ride with you."

"I appreciate it."

"What time are your parents taking us to dinner?"

"Mom made reservations for 7:00pm. You brought a coat and tie, right?"

"Yes. I brought the sports coat I wear on Fridays and when we have a game on the weekend and three ties. I'll let you choose."

"As you should! Men should always ask women for their opinion and listen!"

"Especially Russian women, right?"

"Yes!" Larisa exclaimed, squeezing my hand.

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Albert

"How are you progressing toward Eagle Scout?" Uncle Jake asked as we sat in his backyard with Cokes.

"I have eleven of my thirteen merit badges completed. I also arranged with Grandpa Al and Doctor Malik to do a service project at the hospital. I, and the rest of my troop, will visit kids in pediatrics, especially kids with cancer, and read to them or play games with them."

"How long does it last?"

"We'll do it one Saturday a month for six months, starting in January."

"That's an excellent service project!"

"Is there anything else you can think of I need to do to get into the Academy? I mean, besides straight A's."

"Keep your nose clean, but I don't think I have to tell you that! Then it comes down to your interviews and your contacts. I'll help, if I can, but I think between your Dad, Captain Schumacher, Commander Shaughnessy, and Samantha Spurgeon, you have it covered. You're going JROTC, right?"

"That's the plan," I replied. "I'll go to the Lab School at the University of Chicago this year. For Freshman year, I'm planning to go to William Howard Taft High School where they have a JROTC program. They've won the Distinguished Unit award the last two years."

"Where is that in relationship to the Compound?"

"It's on the North Side, so I'll have to take the CTA, but I can do that with no trouble. I just take Metra Electric and Blue Line."

"And in the Winter?"

"I'm from Chicago! But I'm sure Dad or one of the women at the compound will drive me if necessary. Aunt Josie works on the North Side, so it's not really too far out of her way. And it's not too far out of the way for Aunt Jennifer's drive to work. I already spoke with all of them, so it's all good."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise from someone as squared away as you are! How was the flying?"

"Great, as always! I was allowed to taxi, take off, and land!"

"Just remember one thing -- you have to make up your mind between growing up and becoming a pilot. You can't do both."

I laughed, "Spoken like a bubblehead!"

"Dad, Albert, dinner is ready!" Amelia called out from the sliding glass door.

"Let's hit the mess hall!" I exclaimed.

"I think you'll find the quality here a bit better than military chow, even in the officer's mess!"

"If not, Amelia's great-grandmother will haunt Aunt Joyce for the rest of your lives!"

"I think she already does!" Uncle Jake declared.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Congratulations, Pumpkin!" Dad said when I came back to where he was standing. "Your first gold medal!"

"Thanks, Dad!"

I'd won the kata competition for my age group, which meant our dojo had won a medal and two trophies. The others were a trophy for second place for Mr. Felipe in the 'senior' category, and a trophy for second place overall for Jolene.

"Ready to head home?" Dad asked.

"Yes!"



September 2, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Thanks for picking me up, Dad!" I said when I walked up to him in the arrival hall at O'Hare.

"You're welcome. We're heading home via Meigs. Aimee and Albert should be landing in about twenty minutes."

"OK."

"How was DC?"

"Good. General Dmitry is going to come to Toronto for the Christmas tournament, and I think Larisa and Tatyana Ivanova will come along. I gave him Liesel's phone number so he can get one of the reserved rooms."

"Maybe you guys will have a fighting chance with Dmitry Sergeyevich there!"

"Good luck with that thought!" I replied. "We'll have three Canadian teams in our group, and that's a nightmare. But right now, we need to focus on St. Rita and Lane Tech!"

"That's true. Keeping your focus is key to beating the two best teams in the city."

"Besides ours!" I corrected.

"Last year?" Dad asked.

"Ugh!" I groaned. "Don't remind me!"

"Actually, remember that game and use it to remind you what happens when you lose focus. Not you, personally, but the team. And as captain, it's your job to help the team stay focused."

"I think we're in good shape. The new guys are coming up to speed pretty quickly."

"Nicholas?"

"He's better than his line assignment, but as a Freshman, and the smallest forward on the team, the most Coach could do was third line. I bet Coach moves him up part way through the season or if there's an injury."

"Being a year younger at this age is huge," Dad said. "Think about how much taller you were at fourteen compared to when you turned thirteen."

"True. I don't remember, but how tall was Nicholas' dad?"

"Five eleven," Dad said. "Just a bit taller than I am. Nicholas favors his dad, not his mom."

"Good thing! Aunt Bethany is short!"

"Compared to you, almost everyone is short!" Dad chuckled. "You're six two! And speaking of someone who isn't shorter, have you heard from CeCe?"

"Yes. Her dad got her a mobile phone, so we text. She'll be home at Thanksgiving."

"You and Libby are spending time together again, I hear."

"My moms talk too much!"

Dad laughed, "All they said is you guys were reestablishing your relationship."

"Libby's girlfriend broke up with her by text message."

"Ouch," Dad observed.

"Yeah."

 Albert

"Another awesome job, Albert," Commander Shaughnessy said as I brought the plan to a stop on the ramp at Meigs.

"Thanks! I just wish I could get my license sooner! It's three years before I'm allowed to solo, and one more year before I can get my license."

"That's true, but unlike most students, you'll be fully prepared the day you turn sixteen."

I shut off the engine and electrical master switch, and we got out of the plane. I set chocks, and we went into base ops so Aimee could order fuel and file her flight plan for her return trip. I helped her with the weather en route, and there was nothing that would cause her any trouble or delays. Once the flight plan was filed, we shook hands, and I walked outside to see Dad just pulling into the parking lot.

"Hi, Albert!" Dad said. "You'll need to sit in the back. I came straight from O'Hare."

"I'll live!" I declared, and got into the back seat, tossing my bag on the seat next to me.

"Hey," Jesse said. "How was Cincinnati?"

"Great! I mostly hung out with Grandpa Adams and Uncle Jake, but I did some stuff with Joseph, too. How is General Dmitry?"

"Very protective of Larisa!"

I laughed, "You're still alive!"

"And I plan to stay that way!" Jesse declared as Dad pulled out of the parking lot.
"Did Aimee let you fly?"

"Not just fly, but all the radio work, taking off, and landing!"

"I'd be careful what I said to your mom," Dad suggested.

"Well, I'm of the opinion that Mom can live her whole life and never ever hear of those takeoffs and landings!"

Dad and Jesse both laughed at the *Pulp Fiction* quote.

When we arrived home, I went to see Mom to let her know I was home safe.

"How was the flying?" Mom asked.

"Aimee let me fly both ways," I said. "And work the radio."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Mom said.

"Thanks. I'm going to change and then see if Dad needs help setting up for the party."

"I believe your sisters have it all under control."

"That'll be the day!" I said, then headed up to my room.

 Steve

Kurt, Kathy, and their kids arrived early for the Labor Day party, as we'd planned.

"Did you hear from Bethany or Tom?" Kathy asked after her kids went to find mine.

"No," I replied. "I haven't spoken to them since Tom confronted me. I did check with Albert and Jesse, and Nicholas will be here today."

"Thank heaven for small favors," Kurt said. "I tried to talk to Tom but didn't make any headway."

"Tom's just protecting his wife," I replied. "As he should. The only way this is resolved is if Bethany moderates her position. If she doesn't, she's dangerous to all the cousins, and, by extension, their parents. If she were to get wind of anything she considered to be an inappropriate relationship, she'd be required by law to report it, and she would. In the past, she'd have simply not taken notice; now, she's dangerous."

"How so?" Kurt asked.

"Matthew and Chelsea are a couple," I replied. "She's eighteen and Matthew is fifteen. Jesse and CeCe were dating before she left for college, and she was eighteen and he was sixteen. Think of the nightmare scenario if Bethany reported Chelsea."

"You think she'd do that?" Kathy asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "And *that* is the problem. Until our last trip to Iron Mountain, I was sure it wasn't a concern; now it is."

"I don't think she's gone that far," Kathy said, "but I understand your concern."

"In any event, the ball is in her court. I don't think it's wise for me to approach her."

"Nor do I," Kathy agreed. "She's not too happy with me at the moment, either. May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Be careful with your dances with the girls who are under eighteen."

I nodded, "Something I've already considered. The plan is for the kids to hang out mostly at Penny's house and they'll have their own dance floor there."

 Birgit

"That stinks!" Tiffany protested.

"I know," I replied. "But Dad made a very good point about not attracting attention of any kind."

"It's so dumb! People need to butt out!"

"Duh! But as Dad says, we have to deal with the world as we find it, not as we wish it to be. And the last thing you want to do is make anyone suspicious in any way! Well, unless you don't want what you said you wanted."

"I want it NOW!" Tiffany declared.

"And an Oompa Loompa, too, Veruca?" I teased.

"I am NOT like her!" Tiffany protested.

"Except you used her signature line, which is the name of the song she sings right before she's judged to be a 'bad nut!'"

"Hmph! Do you get *your* dance?"

"Daughters get an exception!"

"April is too far away!" Tiffany protested.

"Good things come to those who wait!" I declared.

"They'd better!"

 Jesse

"We're going to mostly hang out at Penny's house today," I said to Libby, Angelina, and Pete who arrived together.

"Why?" Libby asked.

"So we can have our privacy!" I replied. "We'll eat with everyone, but dancing and other stuff is at Penny's house."

That was only partly true. Dad had explained the problem to all of us kids, and it made sense, but it wasn't something I could really talk about with anyone outside the family, because that would defeat the whole purpose.

"So, an orgy then?" Libby smirked.

"Sign me up!" Pete exclaimed happily.

"That might be a bit beyond what our parents would tolerate!" I chuckled.

"You'd participate in an orgy?" Angelina asked Pete. "And have sex in front of a group."

"Sex shows!" Libby interjected before Pete could answer. "That's what we should do!"

"Again," I chuckled, "That might be a bit beyond what our parents would tolerate!"

"You are just no fun, Jesse!" Libby teased.

 Birgit

"Birgit, this is John Bailey," Tabitha said, introducing her much-older boyfriend.

"Hi, Mr. Bailey," I replied, knowing a lot of adults preferred formal address.

"Hi, Birgit," Mr. Bailey replied. "I've heard all about you."

"Lies!" I giggled. "All lies!"

"So you're not intelligent, pretty, and mature?" he asked.

"May I revise my statement?"

"You may!"

"Listen to Tabitha! She knows what she's talking about!"

He laughed, "She said you were a Smart Aleck as well!"

"And Tabitha is right!" Ashley declared.

"Mr. Bailey, this is my sister, Ashley. Ashley, Tabitha's boyfriend, John Bailey."

"Hi!" Ashley said brightly. "Birgit, Dad wants you."

And I wanted Dad, but that wasn't going to happen!

"OK. Excuse me, please."

I went back into the house and found Dad in his study.

"What's up, Dad?" I asked.

"I just wanted to make sure you and Jesse let your friends know about dancing."

"It's so dumb!" I protested. "But, yes, we told them. There's one thing I don't think you considered."

"What?" Dad asked.

"Tabitha hangs out with the High School kids and her boyfriend is WAY older than you and my moms!"

"Nothing is stopping them from being at Penny's," Dad said. "You know the concern."

I smirked, "My friends who would dirty dance with you!"

"Not just your friends!" Dad chuckled.

"Hey, you said I could have my dance!"

"Yes, but it has to be appropriate for a daddy / daughter dance."

"You are just no fun, Dad!"

 Steve

"Do you have a moment?" Julie Moran asked when she and Tiffany arrived.

"Sure," I replied. "Tiffany, the kids are in the backyard."

"Thanks!" Tiffany exclaimed, heading towards the back door while her mom and I went to my study.

"Are we still on for Friday?" Julie asked.

"That's up to you," I replied. "I have a reservation for us at the InterContinental, but I can cancel as late as Friday morning."

"Are you joking?!" Julie exclaimed.

"It's always possible you had started dating."

"Not really safe until after the 10:00am hearing on Friday morning when the decree becomes final. My ex is dating, but I don't want anything to mess things up. And I do not want to miss what will, without a doubt, be an experience I'll never forget!"

"I'll do my best!" I replied.

"Your 'best'?! Losers always whine about their best. Winners go home and fuck the Prom queen!"

I chuckled, "Were you the Prom queen?"

"Not a chance! It was an airhead cheerleader and a dumb jock! It's always a popularity contest."

"You do get bonus points for using 'Darmok!'"

"Tiffany told me about that! And speaking of her, I know what she wants."

"You can say 'no'," I replied. "And I'll abide by it."

"She'd hate me forever," Julie replied.

"Did she tell you or did you deduce it? In other words, does she know you know?"

"I deduced it," Julie said.

"Then may I suggest you discuss it with her?"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," I said firmly. "Have an open, frank discussion with her, give her your opinion and advice, and tell her you trust her to make a good decision."

"She's already decided!" Julie protested.

"And she could change her mind. Either way, so long as you aren't judgmental or prudish, it'll improve your relationship and you never know what she might decide."

"She suspects we've been together."

"As I once told Carol Corday, kids know way more than parents think. Carol was convinced Francesca didn't know about her and Stan before they married. I know for a fact that's not true, because Francesca told Jesse about it when they were five or six. Make that part of your discussion."

"What?!" Julie gasped.

"It'll give you a good segue to discuss healthy sexual relationships. I'm willing to bet she knows you weren't satisfied with your sex life with Jack."

"How?"

"First of all, she hangs out with Birgit, so I guarantee you that sex is a constant topic of conversation! Second, your attitude changed after our night together, and I bet you anything you care to wager that she noticed."

"She did," Julie admitted. "That's what led to discussing Bethany's book."

"Then have a mother-daughter talk and discuss everything."

"Do you know how weird that seems?"

I nodded, "Par for the course here at the Compound where things often go from the sublime to the ridiculous!"

"It's OK to dance with you, right?"

"That's up to you, as is how close you dance."

Julie smirked, "I can wait for Friday to be that close! Remember, I want you to bring your toys and show me how to use *all* of them!"

"I remember!"

 Jesse

"Estefana wants to dance with you," Angelina said as we danced in Penny's basement. "But she's waiting for you to ask."

"Usually it's the girls who ask!" I chuckled.

"I know, but she's never danced with anyone, so she's nervous."

"I'll ask her," I said.

The song finished, and I walked over to where Estefana was standing with some of Birgit's friends, smiled, and took her hand. She smiled back, and I led her to the center of the room just as *What's Luv* by Fat Joe and Ashanti started playing. The song was super suggestive, and if I'd been dancing with CeCe, it would have resulted in virtual sex on the dance floor!

I put my arms around Estefana and started moving. She surprised me by pressing her body against mine and moving slightly out of sync with me, causing our bodies to rub against each other, which resulted in her hard nipples tracing lines across the lower part of my chest. I reacted as well, and there was no doubt in my mind that Estefana felt my boner which was straining against the denim material of my jeans.

If Angelina was correct about Estefana never having danced, she was a natural, and given the state of our bodies and the lyrics, all I could think about was what it would be like to do this without clothes on. When the song ended, she didn't break our clench, and when the next song, *Hot in Herre* by Nelly, began, we started grinding again. She surprised me by singing along with the chorus!

*I am gettin' so hot
I wanna take my clothes off*

I had no choice but to sing Nelly's part!

*It's gettin' hot in here (So hot)
So take off all your clothes*

"Do you want to go someplace private?" I asked as the song ended.

"Yes," Estefana whispered urgently. "Yes!"

XVIII. Pumpkin Has a New Hobby

September 2, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"A proper daddy/daughter dance, Pumpkin," I said when Birgit came into the attic room.

"You're just no fun, Dad!" she complained.

Birgit gave me an evil look, but complied with my request and we danced with appropriate space between us. She was the only one of my daughters, in fact, the only one of the teens, who came up to the attic room. I didn't like the changes, but I was truly concerned about what Bethany might do, and the last thing I wanted to do was give her more ammunition if she decided to fight back in that way.

When our danced finished, Birgit left to rejoin her friends, and I went back to join my wives.

"Don't look now," Kara teased, "but that cute JAG lieutenant who's here for the first time is eyeing you!"

"I hope you mean Jenson, not Marks!" I chuckled.

"You wouldn't have a problem if Lieutenant Marks was eyeing you!" Suzanne declared.

"No, of course not, but he'd be terribly disappointed if he was interested."

"You *never* disappoint, Tiger!"

"In that case, I would absolutely disappoint! And you three are troublemakers!"

"I thought that was our role!" Kara smirked. "Was I mistaken?"

"Apparently not," I chuckled.

"Then go ask her to dance!"

I laughed, nodded, and turned to walk over to where the two lieutenants were standing.

 Jesse

The short walk from Penny's house to the coach house allowed me to regain my senses just enough to ask the most important questions. I totally wasn't surprised to find Estefana was on the Pill and that she had a clean STI test. When we got to my room, I put on the Nelly CD, which had *Hot in Herre*, and pulled Estefana into my arms to resume our dance.

Our clothes didn't stay on past the first part of the song, and I really enjoyed Estefana rubbing her compact body against mine, but I really wanted to do that lying down. I moved her to the bed, had her lie down, and got on top of her. We kissed furiously, and I discovered she was dripping wet, so I lodged my dick against her labia and pushed into her. Estefana groaned into my mouth and shoved her hips upward, so that with one more thrust I was buried in her tight pussy.

Estefana wrapped her arms and legs around me and began moving, similar to how she had on the dance floor, and I began thrusting in and out. Estefana was

very energetic and enthusiastic, and we developed a rhythm of thrusting and grinding, and less than two minutes later, she broke the kiss, groaned loudly, and had a huge orgasm, her internal muscles rippling and squeezing me as I thrust in and out of her. Ten minutes later, after two more huge orgasms for Estefana, I pushed deeply into her, groaned, and fired jets of cum deep inside her spasming pussy.

After the last spurt, I pulled out, then moved down so I could suck on the nipples of her small breasts, then kissed my way down between her legs and brought her off with my tongue. I kissed my way back up her body, suckled each nipple, then French kissed her, before moving next to her.

"«¡Dios mío!»" she gasped.

"Yeah," I agreed.

We lay together for a few minutes while Estefan's breathing returned to normal.

"We should go back to the party," she said. "Just in case anyone looks for me."

"Let's shower," I suggested.

"Yes!" she agreed. "And I want to do this again!"

"Me, too!"

 Steve

"Lieutenant Jenson, may I have this dance?" I asked the pretty young female JG with typically short-cropped brown hair.

She laughed softly and nodded, so I took her hand and led her to the dance floor. Not knowing her, I chose to go with hands on hips and shoulders, rather than body contact.

"I hear you're a walking UCMJ violation!" Lieutenant Jenson said mirthfully.

"Given I'm not subject to military discipline, I'm not in violation! Who's been talking?"

"I can't reveal confidential information to a civilian!"

"Uh huh," I chuckled. "Where did you go to law school?"

"Gonzaga. I'm from Spokane. I applied for my commission the day I received my Bar Exam results."

"Who invited you?"

"Lieutenant Commander Wilson."

That was Aaron, and it wouldn't surprise me if he'd warned Lieutenant JG Jenson.

"May I ask your given name?"

"You may!"

I laughed, "OK, Counselor, what's your given name?"

"My parents thought they were cute and named me Scarlet Rose."

"That's a gorgeous name," I replied.

"For an attorney?" she asked.

"Well, if it makes your opponents dismiss your skills or underestimate you, it's perfect!"

"I hadn't considered that angle," she said.

"Own it, and let them underestimate you, then kick their ass! Your goal is to get to the point my friend Melanie Spencer has reached -- prosecutors cry when she walks into the courtroom!"

"I've heard about her from other JAG officers. I thought they were exaggerating."

"About the crying? Perhaps. Are they scared to death of her when she walks in to a courtroom? Absolutely. Judges are afraid of her. She wins cases that appear unwinnable because she's that good. If she represents someone who is convicted, you can be sure they're guilty. Her effectiveness in death penalty cases has been reduced by the *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act*, but she still wins quite a few appeals of sentences."

"I don't think I'll handle too many death penalty cases. Mostly it'll be drunk and disorderly, UA, and violation of orders."

"You never know," I replied. "Did Aaron, sorry, Commander Wilson, tell you about Nick Evans?"

"Yes. His photo is on the wall in the JAG office at Great Lakes, along with a memorial plaque. Did you want him executed?"

"No. Life incarcerated at Leavenworth was my preferred penalty. That was his wife's preference as well."

"I heard she'd be here. Which one is she?"

"She and her husband aren't here today," I said, trying to stay neutral. "Nick's son is here, but he's next door with the teens at their party."

"I'm curious, but who chaperones?"

"Nobody. We trust them not to break out the crack pipes or have a Viagra-fueled orgy!"

Lieutenant Jenson laughed softly, "Cute."

The song ended, I thanked her for the dance, then went back to my wives.

"Losing your touch, Tiger?" Jessica teased.

"I didn't even try!" I replied. "Steve 4.0, or whatever incarnation this is, isn't prospecting."

"You never prospected!" Kara protested. "Well, except with me!"

"OK, I'm purposefully attenuating my vibe," I replied.

"So long as you're happy," Jessica said.

"I am."

"I think you'll find plenty of med students who would be interested in serious 'stress relief' sessions!" Jessica exclaimed.

"Who will be students in the class I'm leading," I replied. "And despite the wink-and-nod treatment that kind of thing is given in the medical community, it violates our rules. I promise, I'm happy and satisfied, and dialing things back a bit is not a negative thing in any way."



September 3, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Ugh!" Nicholas groaned when he got into Aunt Kara's SUV very early on Tuesday morning. "It's too early!"

"Get used to it," I replied. "You have four years of this! And don't they make you get up early in the Navy for PT or whatever?"

"I'm going to college and medical school, then joining. Officers don't have to deal with that kind of stuff, especially medical officers. Albert will at the Academy."

"How does that work for you?"

"I go to college and medical school, then do something called the Match, but for the military, for my Residency. I'll have my MD and I'll receive a commission. It's also possible to join the Navy and go to medical school, and have them pay for it. I'll decide during college."

"Has your mom come off the ledge about you joining the Navy?"

"No. Tom tried to explain his job is more dangerous than a Navy doctor, but Mom is freaked out because of what happened to my dad."

"Before we were born, the CFD wouldn't go into the projects here without armed escorts, and people shot at firefighters!"

"Tom told me, but Mom isn't rational."

"That sounds like Aunt Jess used to be with Albert's flying. She's chilled a bit."

"I heard he got to take off and land!"

"He did, but don't say anything about that around Aunt Jess."

"I won't."

"How does this work this morning?"

"You mean with school? We shower at the rink, dress for school, then I drive home and drop off my gear. You can drop yours at my house, then get it on your way home from school."

"Thanks."

We arrived at Johnny's Ice House and Nicholas and I lugged our gear inside and went to the locker room to dress for our early morning practice.

 Birgit

I got up early so I could run with Dad and Suzanne, and after running and showers, I went to the sunroom for my morning cuddles.

"Ready for a new school year?" Dad asked as I climbed into the chaise.

"Yes! And ready to be in High School!"

"Did you decide on any extracurricular activities?"

"Boys!" I giggled.

"Yes, yes," Dad said, laughing, "but besides that?"

"I have karate, so I don't think I need sports, so I was thinking about the photography club."

"That sounds like fun," Dad observed. "Do you know what's involved?"

"Not yet. There's a meeting after school today."

"Just let me know what you'll need in the way of a camera. Your Instamatic won't cut it, I'm sure!"

"I think you need a real camera," I said.

"An SLR, most likely," Dad replied. "If you decide to join, find out what you should have, and I'll get it for you."

"Thanks!"

Mom called us for breakfast, but I got my usual extra three minutes of cuddles before we went to eat with the rest of the family.

 Ashley

"This should be interesting!" I declared as Albert, Birgit, Stephe, and I walked into the building at the Lab School.

We used the floor plans that we'd received and we each found our homeroom classes. When I found mine, I was happy because I knew three girls who were there -- Krista, Mary, and Lucía. They weren't part of the stepsisters, but they were friendly, so I felt that was a good thing. I said 'hi' to them, then found the seat with my name and sat down.

My homeroom teacher was Ms. Sally Carlson, and under her name on the board was written 'Phys Ed', which meant she was a gym teacher. She was tall and blonde, and looked like what I thought CeCe might look like when she was in her late thirties or early forties.

"Hi! I'm Chadrima!" a pretty girl with light brown skin said. "My dad teaches physics."

"I'm Ashley! My mom is a trauma surgeon at the hospital."

And my other mom was a chemistry professor, but I felt it was smarter to wait to get to know someone before I hit them with the details of what Dad called the Compound.

"Are you new, too?"

"Yes. I was at LaSalle. You?"

"We were in Georgia. Dad was teaching at Georgia Tech and we moved here in June."

"Where do you live?"

"Near 48th on Kenwood."

"We live on Woodlawn near 49th, so just a few blocks away."

"I love your blonde hair!"

"I love your brown skin!"

"What lunch do you have?"

"Second."

"Me, too! Eat together?"

"Sure!"

A bell rang and Ms. Carlson stood up and introduced herself, then called the roll.

 Birgit

At the end of the day, I stayed at school while my sisters and Albert headed home. I found the correct room for the Photography Club meeting and sat down to wait. There were about fifteen kids in the room, and I wondered how many would join the club.

"Hi, I'm Mr. Tavares!" a man who was about sixty said. "Welcome to the Photography Club informational meeting! Everyone, take a seat."

I was already sitting, so I just waited for the other kids to sit down. Most of them looked like Freshmen, which made sense, as anyone who had already been at the school the previous year was probably already in the club if they were interested. Once everyone was seated, Mr. Tavares began his presentation.

"Photography is much more than just having a camera and taking pictures," he said. "Students in this club have opportunities to improve their skills by

understanding and learning about what makes a good photograph, from composition to artistic expression. We'll be using film cameras for most of our work, but it's perfectly acceptable to use a digital camera on occasion.

"All levels of experience are welcome and encouraged to explore this exciting side of the visual arts. Even if you've never taken a single photo in your life, or only used a pocket camera, you're welcome, as would be a student with a top-of-the-line SLR and a collection of lenses that would cost me a year's salary! For those of you who don't know, the SLR, or Single-Lens Reflex camera is the standard camera you see used by photojournalists and professional photographers.

"Photography Club students are encouraged to practice their skills while photographing school-related activities and sporting events, as well as special moments in your life, including family celebrations, vacations, and, frankly, anything else that might interest you. Even the most mundane objects can be turned into beautiful photographs by the application of creativity and artistry.

"We'll work with both black-and-white and color film, and we'll learn how to develop black-and-white photos. That process is easily done with a dark room, basic equipment, and chemicals. Developing color film is more complex, and not something we're able to do here, but we have an arrangement with Wolf Camera to develop color film at a significant discount.

"To really get the most out of this club, you should either own, or have access to, a proper 35mm SLR camera. You don't need anything fancy, nor do you need more than a single lens to get started. Wolf Camera has several models in various price ranges, and they offer them at only \$25 above their cost to club students, instead of the usual markup. They also provide us with discounts on film purchases.

"I have information packets for you to take home to your parents, which include a permission slip and a list of suitable cameras, though as I said, any proper 35mm SLR is acceptable. One of our students even has a camera once owned by his grandfather. So if your parents or grandparents have a camera they'll allow you to use, that's just fine.

"Our meetings are Mondays and Wednesdays, immediately after school, for two hours. For weeks with a Monday holiday, we'll meet on Tuesday instead of Monday. Our first meeting of the year is next Monday. Take your packets home, speak with your parents, and if you want to participate, bring the permission slip and your camera with a roll of film next Monday. Any questions?"

A few kids asked questions, but they didn't really add anything to what Mr. Tavares had already said. When there were no more questions, we were dismissed, and I left the classroom to meet up with Fangsu, a girl I'd met in Algebra class. Her dad was a math teacher, and it turned out they lived one block north of us on Woodlawn. She was also a Freshman and had gone to the Math Club information meeting.

"I like math," I said as we left the building. "Just not that much!"

Fangsu laughed, "Well, you know the stereotype about Asians and math, right? And I told you my dad teaches math at the University. Mom teaches math at Maria High School. You said your mom teaches Chemistry, right?"

"Yes."

"What do you plan to do when you go to college?"

I laughed, "Busted. Study chemistry!"

Fangsu laughed, "Not computers like your dad? That's what I would have expected because it's the best field to be in. I'm going to study computers in college."

"I like using them for homework and chatting, but otherwise, I'm not really interested. Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"What does your name mean?"

"The Chinese characters mean 'Fragrant flower'. Are you named for a relative the way lots of Europeans and Americans are?"

"No. I'm named for my dad's first girlfriend, who died in a boating accident when she was fifteen."

"Whoa! And your mom was cool with that?"

"Yes. My little sister is named for another one of my dad's girlfriends, who died of cancer when she was in her twenties."

"I think being your dad's girlfriend sounds dangerous!"

'Only to virginity!' I thought, but didn't say.

"He and my mom have known each other since High School, and she's still around, so not that dangerous!"

"Does your name mean anything? I mean, besides being someone else's name?"

"Yes. It's a Scandinavian form of 'Bridget' which means 'power, strength, vigor, and virtue'."

"Are you an athlete? You look like one!"

"No, but I study Shōtōkan karate, and have a brown belt."

"That's cool! When did you start?"

"When I was six. My dad is 6th Dan and is a Master Instructor."

"Wow! That's prestigious!"

"What about you?"

"Soccer. You should join. Everyone gets to play, so there aren't any tryouts."

"I don't really have the time with everything else. I'll have Photography Club two afternoons, plus I have karate three or four times a week."

"Did you see they have a Philosophy Club?"

"Yes, but I'm already a member of a club like that! My brother Jesse and I have what we call 'Hangouts', which are like my Dad's Philosophy Club that he's had for a long, long time."

"Who goes? I mean, to your club?"

"Friends of ours. There's one girl who's nineteen, but everyone else is in High School. You could come, if your parents are OK with it."

"What do you talk about?"

"Everything! Politics, society, sex, current events, or whatever we want to. We meet on alternate Sunday afternoons, and we start next Sunday."

"Where?"

"At our friend Libby's house. Check with your parents and if they're cool, I'll give you the details."

"Awesome!"

 Steve

"Do you have a minute?" Birgit asked after we arrived home from the dojo.

"For you? I have two minutes!"

Birgit rolled her eyes.

"I want to join the photography club. I need you to sign my permission slip and I need a camera."

"An SLR? Film? Digital?"

"Yes, an SLR that uses 35mm film. We can use a digital camera, but only on occasion. There's a list of cameras in the packet they gave us, and we get a good deal from Wolf Camera."

"Out of curiosity, did you ask your mom about this?"

"No, because I need to spend money on technology, and that's something you handle!"

"I am not an expert on film cameras. I know a bit about digital cameras, but Jorge was the photographer."

"It's still something you deal with, not Mom! And she'd say 'yes' to being in the club and then tell me to talk to you about the camera!"

"True," I agreed. "Let's plan to go to Wolf Camera tomorrow after dinner. OK?"

"Yes!"

"And appropriate pictures, young lady."

She rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out at me.

"Very ladylike," I chuckled. "But you know why I had to say that."

"The pictures we took that could have landed us in serious trouble."

"Exactly."

"Society needs to get a grip!" Birgit grouched.

"I agree."

The doorbell rang just then.

"That's probably Peter," Birgit said. "He's coming over to do homework."

"Homework. Uh huh. Anatomy?"

"Well, it sure as heck isn't multiplication!" Brigit giggled.

"Go, you little scamp!"

She skipped off to answer the door while I went to the 'Indian' room to spend time with my wives.



September 4, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"You know I won't change my mind, right?" Sam asked when I stopped in her office on Wednesday morning.

"Not why I'm here," I replied. "You're the company camera expert! Birgit needs a camera for Photography Club."

Sam smiled, "Sorry for the reflexive response, but it seems as if half the company is trying to convince me to stay!"

"You'll be missed! But I think you and Levi have made the right decision."

"Thanks. So, your Pumpkin has a new hobby; how much do you want to spend?"

"Not particularly relevant," I replied. "I need to make the purchase no matter what the cost."

Sam laughed, "It's Birgit, so sky's the limit?"

"Not quite, but close."

"For a starter camera, you can't go wrong with Canon or Nikon. A Canon EOS 30 or a Nikon FM2. Another option would be a Pentax K1000 if you can find one. They're discontinued, but they're great cameras. If not, a Pentax LX is an excellent camera. None of those are entry level, but they're sturdy, reliable, and have as many lens options as you could possibly want. All of them would retain value on resale as well."

"If you had to pick one?"

"The K1000, if you can find one. You can ask in a professional camera store. If not, then I'd opt for the Canon EOS 30."

"Lenses?" I asked.

"Just start with a standard lens. The EOS line has a specific mount - EF -- so you need lenses compatible with it, but Canon makes just about anything you could imagine. It has a built-in flash, so you won't need a separate one for what Birgit needs at this point. The only other thing is film quality matters."

"The papers Birgit brought home had specific recommendations for black-and-white and color film."

"Then go with that. Knowing Birgit, you'll probably want to develop the film yourself!"

I laughed, "I already warned her about those kinds of photos. The school has a darkroom for black-and-white, and an arrangement with Wolf Camera for developing color film."

"That's far more complicated. I could show you how to develop black-and-white in an afternoon with just basic equipment."

"I prefer my Apple QuickTake 200, though it's five years old at this point, so it's time to replace it."

"Get a Canon EOS-1Ds, which will be released later this year. The pre-release specs are that it's a 11.1 megapixel digital SLR with both manual and automatic focus, and it will have a rechargeable battery."

"What's THAT going to set me back?" I asked.

"Pocket change for you," Sam replied with a silly smile. "About eight grand."

"Ouch. My Apple camera was around \$600, and it replaced the previous model, which was around \$750."

"The Canon EOS D60 is around \$2100 all in, including battery, charger, and DC kit. And it's available now."

"That's more in my price range. I mean, sure, I could afford eight grand, but the quickest way to the poor house is spending money indiscriminately!"

"That new Canon is my fantasy cam! But given our plans, I'll stick with my film camera."

"That makes sense. Thanks for the advice."

"You're welcome!"

 Jesse

"Jesse, I want you to meet some new girls," Brooke said at lunch. "They're Freshmen, and I think they'd be great for the Hangouts."

"You remember that their parents have to approve, right?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Erica Olson, Mylissa Harris, and Lainie Drew. They're all interested in Math Club."

"Kill me now!" I groaned. "More math nerds!"

Brooke laughed, "You certainly didn't object to integrating with me and making me no longer convergent!"

"Which doesn't mean you aren't a math nerd!"

"But you LIKE my slopes and curves! And you agreed completely with my formula!"

"True," I grinned. "Sure, they can join if their parents are OK with it. Make sure they know that no topic is off limits. Do they know about our unique family situation?"

"The usual rumors that ran around LaSalle because of your sisters and brother, and Erica has been to hockey games with her dad and has seen your moms."

"OK. Birgit has a new friend who'll probably be there, and she's, Loki forbid, in the Math Club at the Lab School."

Brooke laughed, "Math nerds rule! But it makes sense, really."

"Why?" I asked.

"Think about how math works -- everything is logical and has to have a proof or you only accept it tentatively. And it can be proven right or wrong. So it makes sense we're into philosophy."

"I suppose so," I replied.

"More so than dumb jocks with big dicks!" she teased.

"Who's dumb?" I asked with a grin.

Brooke laughed, "According to your sister? Every boy on the planet!"

"I'd be very careful taking life advice from my sister!"

"Why? She's the coolest, most interesting, funnest girl I know! And she's gorgeous!"

"And if you tell her that, I'll call my Sicilian friends and you'll never be seen again!"

"Oh, come on! You agree with me!"

"And if you think I'm going to admit that, you're crazier than the average High School girl!"

The warning bell rang, which meant we had to hurry to chemistry class to beat the tardy bell.

 Birgit

"I'm here to buy a camera for the Laboratory School Photography Club," I said to the man behind the counter at Wolf Camera.

"Do you have the coupon he provided?"

"Yes!" I declared, handing it over.

"What were you looking for?"

"My dad's employee, who knows lots about cameras, suggested I get a used Pentax K1000 body."

"I don't have one. We can't keep them in stock. I could call around, but there are no guarantees. You might try eBay, but that's risky."

"Then I think I'll go with the Canon EOS 30, please."

"I have that in stock. Do you want film as well?"

"Yes, three rolls of black-and-white and three rolls of color. I'd like the recommended Fuji color film, and Agfa for the black-and-white, please."

"Will you need a camera bag?"

"Yes, please. Just a plain black one is fine."

"How do you plan to pay?"

"First National Bank of Dad!" I giggled.

Dad and the clerk both laughed.

"I'll use my Amex, if that's OK," Dad said.

"It is."

"While you're at it," Dad said, "I'm interested in replacing my Apple QuickTake 200 with a Canon EOS D60."

"I have that in stock. Complete or just the body?"

"Complete, please."

"I can't sell it to you for the Photography Club price because it's for you, but I'll knock a hundred bucks off."

"Thanks."

"Do you need a camera bag?" the clerk asked.

"No, I have one, thanks," Dad said.

"Then let me get everything for you and get you on your way."

Twenty minutes later, after Dad had paid for everything, we left the camera store.

"I can't believe how expensive that digital camera is!" I exclaimed.

Dad laughed, "Sam suggested I get a Canon EOS-1Ds, which will be released later this year and costs \$8,000!"

"Whoa! That's like four times what you just paid for your new camera!"

"Sam called it 'pocket change!'"

I laughed, "Maybe for Samantha! Or Mom! The doctor mom, I mean. She makes more than you do!"

"Do you hear me complaining?"

"Only a «jävla idiot» would complain! Oh, wait!"

"Very funny, Pumpkin."

"You know I love you, Dad!"

"I do!"



September 5, 2002, Aurora, Illinois

 Matthew

"Matt Adams is cast as Professor Harold Hill," Mr. Fruits announced. "Maggie Jones is cast as Marian. Nick Pancuch is cast as Marcellus. Josh Edmonds is cast as Mayor Shinn. Nellie Laird is cast as Eulalie Shinn. Tara Schmidt is cast as Mrs. Paroo. Chaz Williams is cast as Winthrop. Mark, Matt W, Jack, and Carl are the barbershop quartet. The rest of the casting will be posted, and if you aren't given a named role, you'll be in the band and chorus. Scripts are by the door. Take one as you leave. See you tomorrow!"

"Another stage kiss between you and Maggie," Josh teased as we left the meeting.

"And that's all it is," I replied.

"He's whipped," Matt W said.

"If I had a girlfriend who was eighteen and looked like Chelsea, I'd do anything she wanted!" Nick declared.

"The key words there being 'if I had a girlfriend'," Tina teased.

"We could go out tomorrow!" Nick said to Tina.

"I'd need to have a lobotomy to accept a date with you!"

"Nick is actually a nice guy," I countered. "And he promises he'll keep his hands to himself AND not try anything at all, right Nick?"

"Uh, yeah," Nick said.

"Seriously?" Tina asked. "You think I should go out with a guy who basically tells every girl in the school he wants to sleep with them?"

"So he's the only truly honest guy in the High School!" I declared.

Everyone laughed hard.

"You are," Maggie said.

"You have no idea what goes on in my mind in that regard!" I chuckled. "The key is I know better than to say anything that will get me in trouble!"

We left the building and everyone said 'goodbye' and headed to their parents' cars. I was riding with Maggie and her mom, so I went with her.

"So, what do you think about?" she asked with a silly smile just before I opened the door to her mom's car for her.

"Forget I said that!" I chuckled.

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours!"

"Cute," I replied and opened the door to the car for her.

She got in and I shut the door, then I got into the back seat.

"Hi, Matt!" Mrs. Jones said. "How are you?"

"Good, thanks!"

"What parts did you kids get?"

"Marian and Professor Hill," Maggie replied.

"I'll have more pictures of you kissing Matt than of you kissing Mark!" her mom said.

Which was a significant change in attitude from wanting to ban Maggie from drama. Mom and Eduardo had really worked wonders on Maggie's parents.

"MOM!" Maggie protested.

"Kissing is fine, Margaret," her mom said.

I couldn't see, but I was positive Maggie rolled her eyes in response to her mom using her given name. Maggie didn't say anything and her mom pulled out of

the parking lot of the school and headed for the subdivision where both our families lived.

"Mom, can I do homework at Matt's?" Maggie asked.

"Sure," Mrs. Jones said. "Dinner is at 7:00pm, so be home by then."

"Yes, Mom! Matt's family eats at 6:30pm, so I'll be home around then."

Mrs. Jones dropped us at our house and we went inside to find Michael and Andi doing homework at the kitchen table. Maggie and I chose to sit in the living room and got out our books.

"So what do you think about, Matt?" she asked.

"I was mostly teasing because I think we're being too hard on Nick."

"Mostly?"

"You can't repeat this, OK?"

"OK."

"I've thought about kissing you for real. But you know I'd never do it."

"Same for me. Well, not 'never', but never so long as you and Chelsea are together, and you guys are engaged, so that's right out!"

"It is."

"Do you ever wonder..."

"About what? Us? I suppose, in a way, because you're my best friend and because Mom and Dad were close friends."

"The chances I'd share an apartment with you before we married are zero!" Maggie declared.

"But you've thought about it!"

"Maybe," Maggie replied, blushing slightly.

"Those thoughts are normal," I replied. "But the important thing is to stay true to yourself, and I know what that means. Nothing good can come of doing something that would hurt you and hurt Chelsea, not to mention leading to my immediate death!"

Maggie laughed softly, "And that's one of the things I like best about you, Matt. You gave your word and you'll keep it, no matter what."

"I learned that from my dad. The only thing we have is our reputation, and once that's ruined, it's nearly impossible to recover. Not keeping your word is the quickest way to destroy your reputation irrevocably."

"True."

"Shall we do our Geometry homework?"

"Ugh. Yes."



September 6, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

When I left work on Friday, I headed straight to the InterContinental Hotel to meet Julie Moran. She'd called earlier to confirm that her divorce decree was final, and confirmed we meet at the hotel at 5:30pm. When I drove up, I pulled into the valet lane and turned my BMW over to the valet, then rolled my eyes when the kid turned to his partner and said it was a manual.

"You don't drive stick?" I asked the kid.

"No. I never learned. And we get so few manual transmissions because most of the cars we park are rentals."

"Learn," I suggested. "It's a skill everyone should have."

"My parents have never owned a car with stick," he replied. "Nor my uncles or aunts."

"What is this world coming to?" the other valet, a man close to my age, asked.

"No good, that's for sure!" I replied.

He handed me a valet ticket, and I went into the hotel and saw Julie in the lobby. I greeted her, then went to the reception desk, signed for the room, let them run my Amex card for 'incidentals', then received a pair of plastic keys.

"Do you need help with your bags?" the clerk asked.

"No, thank you," I replied.

I had my overnight bag and the small duffel bag with the toys, both of which I'd carry myself.

"Then enjoy your stay with us, sir! You have late checkout tomorrow, so anytime before 4:00pm is fine."

"Thanks."

I'd leave before then as I had to be at the dojo at 10:00am, but I'd taken late checkout so Julie could stay as long as she liked. I walked back to her, took her hand, and led her towards the elevators.

 Jesse

"What are we doing tonight?" Angelina asked when we got out of bed so we could shower before meeting the gang.

"There's nothing playing at the theater any of us wants to see," I replied. "Some of the guys want to see *A Knight's Tale* which we have on DVD, and Libby was OK with that."

"That's fine with me. Pizza, right?"

"Yes."

We got into the shower and began washing each other, something I really enjoyed doing with girls after fooling around. To me it was a good transition after great sex, and the sex with Angelina absolutely was great. The only concern was that she wanted to be my girlfriend, and I still wasn't interested in going steady with anyone. If I had wanted to do that, I'd have done it with CeCe, who I realized I really missed.

While Angelina was great, she wasn't CeCe, or Scarlett for that matter. I was positive at some point Angelina was going to push the issue, and I'd have to push back. I wasn't hiding anything from her, but I didn't share with her the way I had with CeCe or Libby. I was happy Libby and Lilibeth were together, though they weren't exclusive.

We finished our shower, dried off, and dressed, then left the house to head to Giordano's for pizza with the gang, though the group had changed because the seven kids who had been Seniors the year before were all college. I missed Kwame, and realized I needed a new guy friend to talk to, but didn't have a leading candidate from the hockey team.

"What are you thinking about?" Angelina asked.

"Kwame," I replied. "He and I were best friends and now he's at Maine. The same thing happened two years ago when Mia and Jerry left for UW Madison. It's the problem with High School friends -- they leave, you leave, or you both leave."

"Boyfriends and girlfriends, too."

"Sure," I agreed. "That's one more reason not to go steady with anyone."

"Not because you want a different girl every day of the week?"

"That might have been a bit excessive," I chuckled. "But that wasn't the reason. I just don't think it's smart to be in an exclusive relationship. I tried, and it went badly both times. And I don't want to be in a situation where I have to choose between a girlfriend and my friends, especially given I'd choose my friends every single time."

"Really?" Angelina asked.

"Really. There is no chance I'm even thinking seriously about getting married until after college, and so much can change between now and then. I like hanging out with my friends."

"More than sex?"

"Honestly? If I had to choose one or the other, I'd choose my friends."

Angelina was quiet the rest of the way to Giordano's and I wondered if I'd just inadvertently ended our relationship.

XIX. Not the Weakest of the Herd!

September 6, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"You have about fifteen hours before I have to leave for the dojo," I said to Julie when we got into the room.

"Anything goes?"

"So long as there are no permanent injuries or visible marks, and only involves you and me."

"So, the foursome with two of my best friends is out?" Julie smirked.

I chuckled, "If they're single and can show a recent clean STI test, go for it! Well, with one condition."

"What's that?"

"You put your tongue anywhere I do!"

Julie squealed and smacked my arm, "Not in this lifetime!"

"You do realize I was teasing, right?"

"Were you?"

"Yes. I've had sex with a group of girls where the girls didn't do anything with each other, or at most kissed, and there is no way I'd try to get you to do something you weren't comfortable doing."

"It's not about comfort!"

"No judging," I said firmly. "Just because it's not for you doesn't mean it's not for anyone else. Remember, each person's sexual expression is personal and individual."

"Including my daughter's," Julie said. "And that's a difficult thing to wrap my head around."

"It is for most parents," I replied. "Did you have your talk with her?"

"Not yet. I don't want the talk to feel forced."

"So, other than calling two friends?" I asked.

"I asked for an experience I'd never forget, and it needs to top last time!"

"And the toys?"

Julie smirked, "You'll need to explain how to do it, but I want to peg you!"

"Whirlpool first?"

"Yes!"

 Jesse

"Just walk me home, please," Angelina said when I asked her what she wanted to do when *A Knight's Tale* ended.

I nodded, and we left the house, and once we were on the sidewalk, I felt I had to ask.

"Were you hoping we'd go steady?" I asked.

"Yes," Angelina admitted.

"You do remember I told you that wasn't in the cards, right?"

"Yes, but we get along great, we really like each other, and we both really enjoy sex with each other!"

"That's all true, but it's not enough to make me want to go steady with anyone at this point. You know how well CeCe and I got along, and we weren't steady."

"Because you like having sex with lots of girls. I get it, but you like it with me and I do everything you want!"

"It's not about sex," I replied. "Remember what I said about friends earlier? That's totally true. I want to be free to spend time with whomever I want, whenever I want, without having to worry about a girlfriend objecting or being upset or whatever. And that would be true even if the only way I could have sex was going steady."

"I don't believe you!" Angelina protested.

"Whether or not you believe something has zero effect on whether it is true or not. The decision is yours. We can continue as we are, or not."

"You don't care?"

"I do care, but I was clear about my limits before your «quince» and nothing has changed."

Angelina was silent the rest of the way to her house, and when we arrived, she simply went inside. I shrugged and turned for home.



September 7, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Details!" Kara demanded when I arrived home to get ready for karate.

I laughed, "Good morning, sexy wife!"

"Good morning! Spill!"

I took her hand and led her up to the master bedroom so I could change into my gi.

"We had a very nice dinner, great conversation, and enjoyed each other's company," I said, putting the bag of toys on the closet shelf.

"Snuggle Bear..." Kara said, trying to sound threatening.

"We also had breakfast this morning and used the whirlpool."

"You are frustrating!"

"I know," I replied with a grin.

"Steve..." she whined. "Tell me!"

"Seriously? Whinging?" I asked.

"Well, I can't bribe you, so I thought I'd try annoying you!" Kara replied with a silly smile.

"That doesn't even work for the kids," I chuckled. "I'm immune. To answer your question, double penetration using toys while I fucked her mouth, she pegged me, and we otherwise did our best to fuck each other unconscious. More importantly, though, we had a good conversation and I think she's in a very good place now that her divorce from Jack is final. I fully expect to see her with a boyfriend soon."

"Is she going to allow Tiffany to have her fantasy 'expert deflowering'?"

"We carefully avoided that topic," I said, "but Julie did commit to having a heart-to-heart mother / daughter conversation when we spoke last week."

"Somebody should convince Birgit those talks are a good idea!" Kara complained.

"I thought you two were getting along just fine," I said.

"We are, but I wish she would talk to me even more."

"I understand, but one of the most important principles in child rearing is that the kids have to be free to define the terms of their relationship, both with us and with others."

"Says the dad who is worshiped by his children!"

"I think you might want to ask Stephie or Albert about that!" I replied. "And you know what Jesse and Birgit would say if you accused them of holding such an odious opinion!"

"Oh, please!" Kara protested. "Jesse is an act, and you know it! He has to maintain 'cool' at any price! And Birgit, despite her disappointment about her lack of an 'expert birthday deflowering', still worships you! As for Albert, he looks down his nose at anyone who isn't as 'squared away' as he, Commander Shaughnessy, and General Dima are! And Stephie is better now that Nicholas is living at home."

"True. But I'll tell you a secret -- Birgit will realize she needs her mom."

"She has Katy as a surrogate!"

"Yes, but what I said is still true. Look at how my relationship with Jesse plays out. Mostly, he doesn't need a dad except as a competitor to dethrone, but on occasion, he needs my advice. And I'm OK with that because he's a really good kid. They all are."

"It's different for moms," Kara sighed. "Well, *normal* moms. Jess is a doctor and there is nothing normal about them!"

I chuckled, "No kidding!"

I finished changing into my gi, and we went downstairs to join Suzanne and my daughters for the walk to the dojo.

 Birgit

"Did you meet any guys at school this week?" Naomi asked when the Girl Gang got together on Saturday afternoon.

"None worth talking about," I replied, then teased, "Did you?"

Naomi laughed, "At Maria? Right!"

"You could always play for the correct team!" Lilibeth teased.

"Totally not my thing!" Naomi declared.

"Any port in a storm!" Libby exclaimed. "I have WAY more options for dates doing it my way! And girls are soft and cuddly, right Lilibeth?"

"Yes!"

"Nobody cuddles the way my dad does," I said. "It's different, obviously."

"For you!" Tiffany declared.

"What are we doing today?" Hannah asked.

"The only movie that even looks halfway decent is *Signs*," Lilibeth said, "but it's science fiction about an alien invasion."

"Ugh," Missy replied. "No thanks!"

There was a general agreement, including Lilibeth, that we'd do something else.

"How about mini golf?" Zaida suggested. "There's a really good one just north of the Loop, if everyone can go into the city."

We all agreed, and after everyone checked with their parents, we headed for the Metra train to take us into the city. It took nearly an hour from when we left the house to get to the mini golf course on Randolph Street, not too far from Lake Michigan. We got our clubs and balls and went to the first hole. We had to play in groups of four, per the course rules, so we split into three groups, with Tiffany, Naomi, and Hannah playing in my group with me.

"The guy behind the counter was a hunk!" Tiffany exclaimed.

"So go for it!" Hannah suggested.

"I have other plans!" Tiffany declared.

"Tiff," I warned.

"I didn't say what the plans were!" she protested.

"How old do you think he is?" Naomi asked.

"Around twenty, I'd guess," Tiffany replied.

"I bet he'd be interested in scoring!" I giggled. "But fewest strokes *loses!*"

The girls laughed.

"What's par, Birgit?" Naomi asked.

"Hundreds if you train the boy correctly! Or if he's an older guy and has lots of experience!"

"Hundreds?" Hannah asked. "The other girls I know who've done it say it lasts like two minutes!"

I giggled, "I'm just a good teacher!"

"Would you do it with the guy at the counter?"

"He's cute, but he didn't seem interested in us."

It was our turn to play the hole, so we had to stop talking. Hannah did best, only needing two shots, while the rest of us needed three. We had to wait for the group that had Lilibeth, Libby, Cynthia, and Laurie to finish before we could play the second hole.

"Flirt with him!" Naomi suggested. "See what happens."

"The same thing that *always* happens when I flirt with older guys," I complained.

"They all think I'm too young!"

"I wish all adults were like your parents," Naomi said.

"Then maybe we wouldn't have dumb laws that try to tell us what we can do with our bodies!" Tiffany exclaimed. "Seriously? Seventeen to legally have sex? And laws against abortion? There are way too many control freaks in the world!"

"Your mom isn't too bad," I observed. "She seems to have mellowed a lot lately!"

"And you know why!" Tiffany exclaimed.

"Why?" Naomi asked.

"Tiff," I warned.

"Well, that explained it!" Naomi giggled. "Tiff's mom got what we all desperately want!"

"Just remember the rules," I cautioned.

 Jesse

"You don't want to do it with me?" Viktoria whined into the phone.

"Of course I do!" I replied. "But it's not like I can come to your house and pick you up! Your dad would lock you in your room if he saw me pull into the driveway and would never allow me in the front door!"

"It's not my fault!" she protested.

It actually was because of the lie she'd told about me in a fit of pique, but saying that wouldn't help.

"I didn't say it was!" I countered. "But you have to figure out what to do about your dad. I can't fix that. If you can figure out a way to get together, let me know."

"You can use the car anytime, right?"

"Yes, though it's best if I know the day before."

"I'll call you soon! I promise!"

We said 'goodbye' and I went back to playing video games with Albert and Nicholas.

We'd played about ten minutes when I heard the doorbell, then heard the door at the top of the stairs out of the Duck's Nest open.

"Jesse, you have a visitor," Mom One called down.

I handed the controller to Nicholas and went up to see who had showed up unannounced.

"Hi!" Estefana exclaimed. "Are you busy?"

"I was playing video games with my brother and a friend," I replied.

"I thought maybe we could do something today," she said invitingly.

I don't have plans after dinner if you want to hang out," I said.

"You'd rather play video games than..."

"It's not cool to kick my brother and my friend out so we can hang out."

Estefana pouted, but then asked, "What time?"

"If you wanted to grab burgers, we could do that. Come by around 5:30pm."

"OK. I'll come back then," she said.

She left, and I headed back towards the door to the basement.

"You sent her away?" Mom Two asked.

"Only temporarily," I replied with a grin. "I didn't think it was cool to kick Albert and Nicholas out of the house because a cheerleader was making a 'booty call!'"

Both my moms laughed.

"You're too much!" Mom Two declared.

"I know!" I replied smugly, then went downstairs before they could respond.

 Matthew

"There's nothing playing at the movies," I said as Chelsea and I were making dinner, "but the Shakespeare Rep is putting on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, if you want to see it."

"That would be cool!" Chelsea agreed. "Can we get tickets?"

"They usually don't sell out," I said. "Let me call the box office and check."

I wiped my hands on a dishrag, then picked up the newspaper, found the ad for the show, and dialed the number listed for the box office. They had tickets available, so I used the Visa that dad had arranged for me to have and reserved two tickets.

"All set," I said when I hung up the phone.

"Who pays the credit card?"

"Dad or mom. I'm not totally sure how they divide it, but they both make enough money that it's not a big deal, and Eduardo makes even more than they do *combined*."

"That's the one I can't believe!"

"OK, but if you place a guy in a CEO position and your fee is twenty-five percent of his compensation, which is in the millions, it's almost like printing money! Before the September 11 attacks, every partner made at least a million bucks a year. The attacks hurt business, but it's starting to come back. He might have a bad year and make only half a mil."

"Unreal. I think it would take a decade for my mom or dad to earn that kind of money."

"We're not going to be swimming in cash while I'm in the Navy and you're teaching, but we'll be fine. We won't have any debt, which is the most important part of living comfortably and being able to save. Not to mention the bonuses the Navy offers for nucs."

"I still don't like the idea of you being away for months and months on deployment!"

"I know, but be glad it's not boomers like Uncle Jake. They disappeared for up to six months at a time with no contact. Fast attacks put into port, so I'll be able to call you, and you might even be able to travel to Scotland or Portugal or wherever."

"That would be cool! But I'll still miss you. Changing subjects, would you write your play dates on the calendar so I know when they are?"

"We have play dates every time I'm here!"

"Goofball!"

"I'll put them on the calendar. I was thinking the best plan is for you to take the train after your last class on a Friday, then we stay at my house. You can take the

train in on Monday morning, or ride in with Mom or Eduardo, if they're driving."

"That works."

 Birgit

"I can't believe he ignored you!" Naomi exclaimed as the Girl Gang walked toward Ed Debevic's for dinner.

"Everyone has been brainwashed to think teenagers are the same as toddlers," I observed. "I see it everywhere, not just trying to flirt with older guys."

"Maybe he's gay?" Lilibeth suggested.

"It's possible," I replied. "But he was totally ignoring me."

"Maybe he's a virgin!" Libby said.

"These days?" I said ruefully. "It wouldn't surprise me despite him being college age!"

We arrived at the restaurant and it took a bit of time for them to set up for twelve of us. About ten minutes later, we were seated and a waiter and waitress came to take our drink orders. When they brought them back, they began taking our orders. Unfortunately, the waiter, who was cute, couldn't sit down the way they usually did, because we weren't sitting in a booth.

"What can I get for you?" he asked me.

"Your phone number!"

He laughed, "Aren't I supposed to ask you?"

"Maybe in the 1950s! I'm a modern liberated woman!"

"You look pretty young! How old are you?"

"Old enough to know what I want!" I declared.

"How about we start with what you want to eat?"

"Bleu cheeseburger and an order of fries," I replied.

He took my order, then moved on to Tiffany. Once the waiter and waitress had our orders, they left to put them in with the kitchen.

"Bold, Birgit!" Tiffany declared.

"Think he'll give you his number?" Missy asked.

"I have no clue," I replied. "He did say I was young."

"But not *too* young!" Naomi countered.

"You'd really do it with him?" Zaida asked.

"I'd hang out with him and if he's a nice guy, I'd let him kiss me," I said. "And if the kiss made me tingle, then, yeah, I would!"

"You'd let some random guy be first?" she asked.

Tiffany, Naomi, and Lilibeth all laughed.

"I'm not a virgin about twenty times over!" I declared.

"You've had sex twenty times?!" she asked, shocked.

"What's the big deal?" I asked. "I was ready, I'm on the Pill, and it feels awesome!"

"Has anyone else done it?" Zaida asked.

"Me," Libby replied.

"And me," Rachel said.

"Me, too," Lilibeth added.

"My dad would kill me if I did that, and he ever found out! We're supposed to wait for our wedding night!"

I rolled my eyes, and so did several other girls.

"Says who?" Lilibeth demanded. "Men! That's who! It's all about controlling women! The same ones who say that try to prevent women from having abortions and block access to birth control! They want *men* to control women's bodies!"

"Zaida, does your dad get to choose who you marry?" Heather asked.

"That is the old way," she said. "In Syria, it used to be that way, but not as much anymore, except in small villages. My parents are from Damascus, and that doesn't really happen now."

"You're a Muslim?" Lilibeth asked.

"No. We're Christians, but you probably never heard of our church."

I smiled, "You're Orthodox, right? Antiochian? And you go to Saint George in Cicero?"

"How do you know?!" Zaida asked.

"My brother Jesse is Russian Orthodox. He attends a ROCOR church."

"But you aren't a Christian?"

"No way! There are far too many rules made by old men! And, honestly, I don't see the point. But let's not argue about it!"

Zaida smiled, "If you want to know, you'll ask. I just live my life according to the teachings of Jesus, and that's my witness."

Which was WAY better than the fundies who were all up in my face about it, like Leah. I had half a mind to introduce Leah to Jesse so she could actually have a chance of seeing God! Fortunately, she was at Kenwood Academy, and I hadn't run into any fundies at the Lab School, and hoped I wouldn't.

The waiter and waitress brought our food with help from to others, and we all dug in.

 Jesse

"Are you allowed to date?" I asked Estefana after we ordered our food.

"Not one-on-one. I'm allowed to do stuff with a group, like last night. For tonight, I told my mom I was meeting some friends and fortunately, she didn't ask. So long as I'm home by 10:00pm, she won't give me a hard time."

"What about your dad?"

"They're separated, so I only see him on Sunday afternoons. We live with my grandma and grandpa. We used to live in Cicero, but we moved in June. How long have you lived here?"

"I've lived in the same house my whole life."

"I've, uhm, heard some wild stories about your family from the cheerleaders."

"From whom?" I asked, trying not to sound as annoyed as I was.

"I probably shouldn't say."

"Yes, you should," I replied firmly. "I seriously need to know."

"Kelly Connor," Estefana admitted.

"What has she said?"

"That, uhm, your dad has a harem and there are wild orgies at your house."

"Neither of those is true," I said firmly. "It's true my dad has more than one wife, but they aren't a harem. And I guarantee you there have been no orgies."

"But you had the entire softball team in the sauna and..."

"And nothing," I interrupted. "We sat in the sauna naked, but literally nothing happened. I mean zero. Not even a kiss or a hug. Kelly can't possibly know because she wasn't there and if she said anything happened, she's a liar."

"She also said she slept with your dad."

I suppressed a groan. I also knew I needed to warn Dad because all hell could break loose. She was eighteen when it happened, so there was no chance of legal trouble with her, but if word got back to the school and they investigated, things could turn ugly fast.

"Seriously," I said. "Do not believe a word she said. Can I ask when you saw her?"

"At Summer tryouts and practice. She's on the cheer team at Northwestern and is at Kenwood Academy on Tuesdays and Thursdays to help our cheer coach."

"Trust me," I said. "You do not want to listen to anything she says. She was pissed because I was seeing Angelina and tried to break us up. She made all kinds of threats after she two-timed one of my hockey teammates and he broke up with her."

"She cheated on him?"

I usually wouldn't talk about something like this, but I needed to destroy Kelly's credibility and her reputation to protect the family.

"Yes. She actually slept with another guy, even though she and Lee were a couple. And worse, she wasn't sleeping with Lee."

"Who does that?" Estefana asked in astonishment. "What a skank!"

"Now you know why she's spreading rumors," I said.

"Yeah."

Our burgers, fries, and shakes arrived, and we started eating.

 Birgit

"Are we having dessert?" the waiter, whose name was Phillip, asked.

"No," Rachel said. "We're going to Coldstone."

"They do have good ice cream," Phillip agreed. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Just the check, please," Rachel said.

"And your phone number!" I added. "Or I can give you mine!"

He smiled at me, but then handed Rachel the check before walking away.

"He thinks you're too young," Tiffany said quietly.

"SO annoying!" I groused.

Rachel let everyone know what they owed, and we all gave her the money. While she counted it out, I got a pen and paper from my purse and wrote my name and phone number on it, then wrote *I'm not too young to be searching for that kind of fun* on it, wondering if he'd get the ABBA reference. I folded the paper, wrote his name on it, and gave it to Rachel to give to him when he came back to collect the money.

He took the money from her and didn't say anything else, so we left the restaurant and headed for the ice cream shop.

"What did you write on the note?" Naomi asked.

"My name, mobile phone number, and a slightly modified verse from *Does Your Mother Know*."

Naomi laughed, "Because you're searching for that kind of fun?"

"And I'm old enough!" I declared.

"You don't have to convince us, Birg!" Tiffany declared. "We agree!"

"I meant that's what I wrote."

"What about Peter?" Naomi asked.

"We're just friends," I replied. "Close friends!"

"Rache," Libby said, "where's Javon?"

"He had his great-grandmother's eightieth-fifth birthday party, and it was family only."

When we got to Coldstone, we all ordered, and then went outside to sit on benches to eat. The ice cream was to die for, and I was glad I went to the dojo three or four times a week or I'd end up looking like a blimp! When we finished, we headed back to the train for the ride back to Kenwood. We had just boarded the train when my phone rang. I slipped it from my pocket and saw a number I didn't recognize, and hoped it was Philip.

"This is Birgit!" I said, after opening the phone to answer it.

"This is Philip. I'm on a break. How old are you?"

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn't see.

"Meet me at Starbucks at 55th and Woodlawn at 8:30am tomorrow and after we have blueberry scones and talk, I'll tell you."

"The fact that you won't tell me says you're too young."

"Stop focusing on the calendar and see the girl who is interested in you! What bad thing could possibly happen in a Starbucks in Hyde Park? Talk to me, then decide! The worst possible scenario is you get a free cup of coffee and a blueberry scone and go home."

"What about your parents?" he asked.

"What about them? I'll tell them where I'm going and what I'm doing and it'll be cool. Come on, what do you have to lose?"

"You'll seriously tell your parents?"

"Seriously! Come on! Take a chance on me!"

Philip laughed, "You like ABBA, obviously!"

"Obviously. 8:30am tomorrow at Starbucks. 55th and Woodlawn."

"I'm not sure this is the best idea, but OK."

"Cool! See you there!"

"See you!"

I closed the phone and slipped it back into my pocket. If he turned out to be a nice guy, I was positive I could get what I wanted!

 Jesse

"What's up?" Dad said when I showed up at the door to the 'Indian' room where he was hanging out with his wives.

"Can we talk, please? Privately?"

"Sure. Let's go to my study."

He excused himself, got up, and we went to his study, where we sat in two wingback chairs.

"Kelly Connor is spreading rumors at Kenwood Academy," I said.

"I thought she graduated," Dad replied.

"She did. She's at Northwestern, but she helped with cheerleader tryouts last month, and she is at practice on Tuesdays and Thursdays to help the coach."

"What's she saying?"

"That you have a harem, that we have orgies here at the house, and that I had sex with the entire softball team in the sauna. But that's not the worst. She's told some of the cheer team that she had sex with you."

Dad sighed, "What did you say?"

"That Kelly is a liar, and I specifically denied that we had orgies here and that I had sex with the softball team. I also said that while you had more than one wife, you didn't have a harem. I didn't specifically deny the accusation about you, I just said Kelly was a liar. And I broke a cardinal rule by revealing that Kelly had two-timed Lee by sleeping with someone when she wasn't sleeping with him, but they were a couple."

"I can see why you felt it was necessary to say that. What else did you say?"

"That my friend should tell the other girls it's all lies. The problem is, even though I think Kelly was eighteen at the time she cheated on Lee, if they investigate, they might figure out that the V-Cards were a real thing and that could be a major problem."

"I think at this point," Dad said, "there isn't anything we can do except wait to see what happens."

"Hopefully, the girl who told me can convince the girls that Kelly is full of shit."

"Are you sure?" Dad asked with a smirk. "Your cred as school stud has to be through the roof if they think you got the entire softball team!"

I laughed, "Why is it the more I try to not be like you, the more I am like you?"

"Just lucky, I guess," Dad chuckled. "But in all seriousness, you are both like me and not like me, and I do believe you've evicted me from your head!"

"True! Now, if I could just get into YOUR head at the poker table."

"Good luck with that, Little Duck!"

"You aren't playing next Saturday, right?"

"By popular demand!"

"My friend is waiting, but I felt I had to tell you about what she said right away."

"Thanks, Jesse," Dad said.

We got up, and I went back to the coach house to be with Estefana.

 Steve

"You look unhappy, Tiger," Jessica observed when I walked back into the 'Indian' room.

"Jesse just let me know that Kelly Connor is spreading rumors at Kenwood Academy, at least amongst the cheer team."

"Uh-oh," Kara voiced.

"Yeah. Fortunately, a couple of the accusations are truly lies and so fantastic, they could be easily denied."

"What?" Kara asked.

"That we host orgies and that Jesse banged the entire softball team in the sauna."

"That ought to be good for Jesse's rep!" Suzanne teased.

"I said that to him," I chuckled. "But the real concern is that she told new members of the cheer team that she had sex with me."

"She was eighteen, right?" Kara asked.

"Yes, but if she lets on that the V-Cards were real, or implies other girls were with me, the investigation could be ugly. I think the girls will all deny it, but that doesn't mean no investigation."

"They were all seventeen except for Angelina, right?" Jessica inquired.

"That's true, and she and Jesse are close, so I can't imagine her saying anything. I agree it would be ugly, but we'll survive."

"And your new rule is eighteen with very limited exceptions," Suzanne interjected. "So in the future there won't be any problems."

"It's not the future that will bite us," I replied. "It's the past. And they keep extending the statute of limitations as well."

"Other than Angelina, everyone except Kristin and Erika were over seventeen, right?" Kara asked.

"That's right," I replied. "In fact, in the last four years, the only girls under the age of consent in the location where I was with them were Rachel, Angelina, Kristin, Erika, and Nicole. In fact, that's the list from the time I turned twenty-six, except for Natalie."

"Really?" Kara asked. "It seems like there were more."

"Really," I replied. "We could check the list Elyse made, but I'm positive."

"So the exposure really is limited to Angelina, then," Kara observed. "I mean realistically, because the other girls would never say a word."

"And Angelina won't," I replied. "Because of her and Jesse."

"So, about those orgies..."

I laughed, "As if you would participate!"

"I'd watch!"

"Dad?" Birgit inquired from the door to the 'Indian' room.

"Yes, Pumpkin?"

"I'm meeting a boy at Starbucks tomorrow at 8:30am for blueberry scones."

"Someone we know?" I asked.

"No. I met him tonight. I figured the best thing to do was meet someplace public."

"Very wise. Have fun!"

"Hugs before bed?"

"Of course."

She came in and hugged me, and then hugged Kara, which I knew was forced, but Birgit was trying her best.

"Good night!" she exclaimed.

We all said 'good night' back to her, and she left.

"The predator lures the prey to the watering hole!" Suzanne observed with a smirk.

We all laughed.

"Somehow I don't see Birgit stalking the lamest one in the herd."

"Not a chance!" Suzanne declared.



September 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"So who's the boy?" Dad asked when we cuddled on Sunday morning after he, Suzanne, and my mom had walked Mom to work.

"His name is Philip," I said. "I met him yesterday."

"Playing mini golf?"

"No, at Ed Debevic's. He's a waiter."

"How old is he?"

"I'm not sure, but I would guess around twenty."

"And he knows you're fourteen?"

"Not yet."

"You can't lie to him, Pumpkin," Dad said.

"I won't," I replied. "I promise."

"And you know how much trouble he could be in, right?"

I rolled my eyes, though I was sure Dad couldn't see.

"*Why no, Detective, he never even kissed me!*" I replied.

"Just be careful," Dad said.

"I promise. I'm learning when to keep my lips sealed!"

"It's about time!"

"Of course, I didn't say sealed around what!" I giggled.

"You are every bit your mother's daughter!"

"Breakfast is ready, Steve-san," Yuriko said from the door to the sunroom.

"Be right there," Dad said. "Birgit, did you tell Yuriko you weren't having breakfast?"

"Yes. Right before you came back from the hospital."

Dad cuddled me for three more minutes, then he went to have breakfast and I went up to my room to get ready for my date!

 Steve

"Would you do me a favor," I said to Suzanne after breakfast.

"Anything!" Suzanne exclaimed.

"Don't be so sure! I want you to have a word with Birgit about the guy she's seeing today."

"You said you would never interfere unless she was in physical danger! What's wrong?"

"I'm not interfering. You heard me last night tell her it was OK to meet him. This morning I asked about his age and I'm concerned about *him*. Birgit needs to tell him how old she is, and he needs to understand the risk. This is a 'big sister' job, not a mom or dad job."

"Your concerned because of Kelly, right?"

"It's certainly made me viscerally aware of the risks. If this were a cousin, I wouldn't be concerned. But there are no boy cousins older than Birgit, and none of the adults have the freedom to do what Birgit wants."

"I would never have imagined it would be difficult to get an older guy into bed in High School!"

"No kidding," I grinned. "You certainly had my interest long before we arrived in Denver!"

"And yet..."

"It had to wait, and that turned out to be a good thing."

"Except for someone failing to mention the STI test!"

"Do me a favor and remind Birgit of the rule. Again, it's a sister thing. I don't want to be an ogre, and I absolutely don't want Kara to be the Wicked Witch of the West again."

"I'll talk to her."

"Thanks."

 Birgit

"Can I come in?" Suzanne said from outside my door after she had knocked.

"Only if you want to see the sexiest woman on the planet!" I exclaimed.

Suzanne laughed and came into the room, closing the door behind her.

"Very nice," Suzanne said, seeing me in my bra and panties.

"I know!" I giggled. "I said 'sexiest woman on the planet' for a reason!"

"I was wondering about a guy you met at Ed Debevic'. I'm guessing he's over eighteen?"

"Yes."

"Does he know you're a Freshman in High School?"

"No. Dad put you up to this, didn't he?"

"We discussed it, yes," Suzanne admitted. "One of Jesse's friends said someone at Kenwood Academy is spreading rumors."

"It has to be that ungrateful bitch Kelly Connor!" I growled. "She got an 'expert deflowering' and is bitching! If anyone should be upset, it should be *me!*"

"You know the risks this boy would be taking, right?"

"Yes, but you know I'm never going to admit I had sex with anyone who's not really close in age! And if I deny it, what are they going to do? What proof would they have? I mean, they could investigate, but they wouldn't find any evidence. Matthew and Chelsea have a 'no public display of affection' rule, and I follow that, even with Peter, who's basically the same age as I am."

"Just be the intelligent, mature young woman I know you to be. And that means following all the rules."

"STI tests and birth control," I replied. "The only thing I do religiously is take my Pill each day."

"Uh-huh," Suzanne said flatly.

"OK, so I worship Dad every day!" I giggled. "But you know what I meant. I need to finish dressing."

"OK. I'll go downstairs. Have fun on your date!"

She left, and I went to my closet to pick out my clothes. I decided on a pair of faded blue jeans which showed off my tight butt cheeks and a form-fitting polo shirt that would show off my boobs, even though they weren't too big. I hoped they'd be as big as mom's were, and I felt genetics were on my side given Stephanie, Grandma Nancy, and Grandma Adams.

I put on my jeans and polo shirt, then pulled on footies. I went to the bathroom and pulled my hair back in a loose ponytail, and used an elastic band to tie it back. I looked at myself in the mirror, and decide I need a bit of makeup to look older, so I put on light pink lipstick, then decided against eye shadow and eye liner.

"You, Birgit Elizabeth Adams are sexy!" I declared.

I giggled, then went downstairs. I put on a pair of flats, said 'goodbye' to Mom, Dad, and Suzanne then left the house to walk the six blocks to Starbucks. When I arrived, I saw Philip standing outside and hurried to him.

XX. A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

September 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"Hi!" I exclaimed.

"Hi," Philip replied.

"Let's get our scones," I said.

We went into Starbucks and walked up to the counter.

"Two blueberry scones and a tall hot cocoa with whipped cream. Philip? Coffee or something else?"

"Tall coffee of the day," he replied. "No room."

"Name?" the female barista asked.

"Pumpkin!" I exclaimed.

The barista laughed and wrote that on the cup for the hot cocoa, then rang up the order. I paid, and she gave us two scones, then filled a cup with coffee for Philip. She handed it to him, and then we moved to the end of the counter to wait for my cocoa.

"Why 'pumpkin'?" Philip asked.

"My dad's nickname for me, and it's easier to spell than my name. They always ask and usually mess it up."

"How do you spell it?"

"B-I-R-G-I-T. But they almost always mess it up because they think it's Bridget. It's the same name, just an old Norse spelling."

"That's cool. So, how old are you?"

"You first!"

"Nineteen, but my birthday is in two weeks. I'm a Sophomore at IIT."

"Both my dad and my mom went to IIT, and my Uncle Dave teaches computer science there."

"Doctor Dave Kallas?"

"Yes. He's not my real uncle, but he and my dad started a computer company with some friends."

"I know the story! I'm a computer science major. So, how old are you?"

"I said I'd tell you after we have our scones and we talk!"

"Pumpkin!" the barista called out.

"Me!" I exclaimed and took my cocoa from him. Philip and I went to sit down.

"Where do you go to school?" Philip asked.

"The Laboratory School at University of Chicago."

"High School, right?"

"Yes."

"What grade?"

"Off limits until after we finish our scones!" I said with a smile. "Where did you go to High School?"

"Naperville Central."

"Are you living on campus at IIT?"

"Yes. I needed the freedom."

"Your parents are control freaks?"

"No, just strict."

"Mine are totally cool," I said. "They know I'm here and they know how old you are."

"I don't believe it!" he exclaimed. "Well, unless you're older than I think you are."

"Out of curiosity..."

"You look like you're fifteen or sixteen, but I think you're a Freshman. If you were a Junior or Senior, you'd tell me. And that's why I don't believe your parents know."

I smiled, "When we finish our scones, we can go to my house and I'll introduce you. And you're right. I'm a Freshman and I'm fourteen."

"I knew it!" Philip declared. "I should never have agreed to meet you!"

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you're too young!"

I rolled my eyes, "First of all, I'm only five years younger than you are. My grandpa is *twenty* years older than my grandma!"

"I bet they didn't get together when she was fourteen!"

"No, but the age difference isn't important! Am I acting like a silly, giggly, fourteen-year-old?"

"No," Philip admitted. "But I could get in a ton of trouble!"

I almost laughed because that meant he was thinking about sex, which was a good thing! But I couldn't let on because I didn't want to scare him away.

"For having coffee and a scone with me at Starbucks? I don't think so!"

"No, but you implied, well, you're too young for that, anyway."

I rolled my eyes, "Says who?"

"I'd get arrested for even thinking about it!" Philip protested.

"Too late, then!" I declared. "You've obviously thought about it or you wouldn't have said what you said! And isn't it up to me? Nobody should be able to tell me what I can and can't do with my body! That's a personal decision and nobody has any right to tell me otherwise!"

"It doesn't work that way," Philip declared.

"Society is stupid," I replied. "I'm not a little girl. Am I acting like a little girl?"

"Well, no," Philip admitted.

"Then see me for the mature young woman I am!" I demanded. "That is why I didn't want to tell you how old I was! You'd only see age, and not who I actually am. In fact, I bet I'm more mature than some of the girls at IIT! And by a long shot! I manage my own life, make my own decisions, and basically behave as an adult. And my parents support that! I have the freedom to be me, and live my life the way I want to live it."

"At fourteen?!"

"Long before I turned fourteen! My youngest sister is eleven, and she has the same freedom! We've all had it since we were toddlers. Mom and Dad believe kids need the freedom to express themselves and to explore the world and find their place in it. I wasn't kidding about my parents knowing I'm here. Most importantly, I didn't *ask*, I simply let them know I was meeting a guy I met at Ed Debevic's and that he was around twenty. The only thing Dad said was not to lie to you about how old I was."

"You can't seriously expect me to believe your dad is OK with you seeing someone my age!"

"Whether you believe it or not, it's true. When we finish, we can walk to my house, which is about six blocks from here, and I'll introduce you. The question is, are you mature and intelligent enough to overlook the age difference?"

"From twenty to fourteen?"

"Do you think I'm sexy?" I asked.

"Er, uhm, uh..." he stammered.

"I'll take that as a 'yes!'" I declared. "I think you're good looking and you seem really nice. And you have to be smart to be in the computer science program at IIT. Did you know my dad helped create one of the most important courses there?"

"Yes. Remember, I said I knew the story."

"And you can't see your way past the age difference?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Why not find a boy your age?"

"Because most boys my age are immature! Even ones in higher grades! And they certainly aren't built like you!"

He was just about six feet tall, and had broad shoulders, though I felt he could use more exercise.

"You're in really good shape," he observed.

"I'm a brown belt in Shōtōkan karate and I'll test for my black belt soon."

"At fourteen?"

"Yes, at fourteen! I started when I was five! My dad is a 6th Dan black belt and my mom is a 1st Dan."

"Now it sounds like a really bad idea to be here with you!"

"Give me a break! First of all, my dad is a pussy cat! Second, he's a complete pacifist. Third, I told you, my parents know I'm here and they're OK with it."

I felt as if I was making no headway, so I simply finished eating my scone.

"I'm fun, interesting, intelligent, and mature," I said. "You have my phone number. I want you to call me, but I obviously can't make you call. I want to see you again, but it's up to you."

I got up from the chair.

"Call if you want to get to know the most interesting person you've met," I said.

I turned and walked out of Starbucks, annoyed and frustrated. Everyone was seeing my age, not my maturity, and I didn't like it one bit.

 Steve

"Why the long face?" I asked Birgit when she returned home after her breakfast date.

"Because dumb boys can't see past my age!" Birgit grouched. "I bet I'm way more mature than any dumb college girl, even at IIT!"

"He goes there?"

"Yes. He just started his Sophomore year in computer science. He knows Uncle Dave, and he knows the NIKA story. But all he could do was think about how old I was instead of seeing me for who I really am!"

"The Empress of the Universe?" I teased.

Birgit narrowed her eyes, "If only you believed that and did what I commanded!"

I laughed, "I don't even do what your moms command!"

"No, but you do *everything* Liz tells you to do!" I protested.

"And I pay her for that privilege!" I teased.

"Grr," Birgit growled.

"I'm sorry, Pumpkin. In a few years, you won't have this problem."

"I can't WAIT to go to Sweden! People there are rational! And they see teenagers as adults! Not to mention fifteen is the age of consent!"

"All of that is true," I said. "But what about cuddles every morning?"

"You'll live," Birgit giggled.

I laughed, "I will if you will!"

"I'll miss cuddles, but I think going to Sweden will be good. It helped you, right?"

"Yes, though you don't have the parental problems I had."

"Well..." Birgit smirked. "You don't do what I tell you to and, Mom, well, never mind!"

"Those are NOT the kind of problems I was referring to. And I thought you and your mom had gotten past that."

"I was teasing, Dad! About both things!"

"Are you sure about that?" I asked.

"I was."

"What do you have planned for the rest of the day?"

"Peter will be here for lunch and he'll spend the afternoon."

"OK."

She left, and I continued to the sunroom, where Kara and Suzanne were relaxing with cups of coffee.

"How did it go?" Suzanne asked.

"The age difference was an issue for him."

"Not surprising. Is she OK?"

"Just annoyed that despite believing she's Empress of the Universe, it does not bend to her will!"

Kara and Suzanne both laughed, and I sat down with my cup of tea to read the *Chicago Tribune*.

 Jesse

I was walking out of church when my phone rang. I looked at the screen, saw who was calling, and flipped the phone open.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Hi! It's Viktoria! What are you doing right now?"

"Walking to my car at the Cathedral. Why?"

"Mom and Dad are out until late tonight. They went to a birthday party for Father Basil, that was for adults only. Come pick me up!"

"And if they call or come home early?"

"I said I was going to call some friends to see if we could get together. Even if they come home, it won't be a problem. And you can drop me at the train station like last time."

I didn't have any plans, and I didn't see how I could get in any real trouble even if her parents found out we'd been together. It would be Viktoria who suffered, and worst case, I would just not see her again. The only concern was how much time we'd have.

"I can be there in about thirty minutes," I said. "But I can't miss our family dinner, which means we'll only have about two hours by the time we get to my house, given when I have to leave to get you home."

"That's time enough for what I want!" she exclaimed. "I'll be out front waiting so you don't even have to get out of the car!"

"OK. See you then! Jesse out!"

"Bye!"

I closed the phone, walked quickly the rest of the way to the car, and headed to Viktoria's house to pick her up. Just under ninety minutes later, we walked into my house, which was empty, and went straight up to my room. Viktoria quickly undressed, revealing her sexy body, and I followed suit. When I was naked, I took her in my arms, kissed her deeply, and we fell into my bed.

 Ashley

"Girls, this is Chadrima," I said. "Chadrima, these are my friends Susie, Ellie, Jasmine, Veronica, and Amber."

"Hi!" they all said.

"Chadrima goes to the Lab School with me. The girls all go to La Salle."

"You're really pretty, Chadrima," Susie said. "Where are you from?"

"India. My dad teaches physics at the University."

"Do you have any siblings?" Jasmine asked.

"A younger brother, but he's a pain in the butt!"

"All younger brothers are!" Amber declared. "Especially mine!"

"Word!" Veronica agreed.

"What are we doing today?" Amber asked.

"Ice cream and then a walk in Washington Park," I said. "It's too nice out to stay inside!"

We left the house, heading towards Hyde Park Avenue.

"What do you usually do?" Chadrima asked.

"Sometimes we go to the movies, sometimes we watch movies at my house, sometimes we bake cookies, and other times we hang out and play games."

"Don't forget the sauna!" Amber exclaimed.

"A Finnish bath?" Chadrima asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Dad has one in the basement, but I don't use it too often when it's warm outside. When it's cold out, it's an awesome way to warm up!"

"It's relaxing," Jasmine declared. "There's also a whirlpool tub in the sauna, which is awesome."

"Chadrima, where do you live?" Susie asked.

"In a house on Woodlawn near 49th."

"Were you born here or in India?"

"India, but we moved to the US when I was two. Dad received his PhD in physics from IIT, went home, met my mom, they married, I was born, and we moved to Georgia when he got a job at Georgia Tech. We moved to Chicago in June when he got the new job. My little brother was born in Georgia."

"Does your dad do research?" I asked.

"Yes. At Argonne National Laboratory."

"We have grown-up friends who work there or at Fermilab," I said.

We reached the ice cream shop and everyone ordered. Once we had our cones or cups, we walked towards Washington Park.

 Birgit

"Let's take a bubble bath," I suggested to Peter after our second round.

"I'm supposed to be home by 3:30pm," he said. "My grandparents from Idaho are flying in this afternoon, and we have to go meet them."

"Ugh," I groaned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal! We didn't have any specific plans."

'Except sex!' I thought. Peter wasn't my boyfriend, so I didn't expect him to account for every second of his life, but not telling me he could only stay for three hours was annoying.

"Then let's shower so you can go home," I said.

"You seem upset," Peter observed as we got out of my bed.

"I'm just a bit annoyed you didn't tell me you could only stay for a few hours, not the whole afternoon."

"I said I was sorry."

"I know, and I accept your apology, but that doesn't make it any less annoying! Just tell me next time, OK?"

"OK."

We quickly showered, Peter dressed, and I walked him to the door. We hugged and kissed, and once he left, I went back up to my room to change the sheets on the bed. Once I'd done that, I sat down at my computer and was happy to see Katy was online.

DadsPumpkin: Boys are SO annoying!

AppleOrchardKaty: Now what?

DadsPumpkin: I met a guy who is good looking and seems nice, but he thinks I'm too young!

AppleOrchardKaty: How old is he?

DadsPumpkin: Sophomore in college.

AppleOrchardKaty: So 19 or 20?

DadsPumpkin: 19. His birthday is in two weeks.

AppleOrchardKaty: He's nearly six years older, so I can understand.

DadsPumpkin: Oh, please! I'm a mature young woman!

AppleOrchardKaty: And under the age of consent in Illinois. He's right to be concerned.

DadsPumpkin: Like I'd EVER complain? Or Dad or my moms would?

AppleOrchardKaty: It would be a big risk for him. And, Birgit, six years is a lot at your age! It's almost half your life.

DadsPumpkin: So? 😞

AppleOrchardKaty: I know you think you're a young adult, and your dad treats you that way, and so do his friends, but other people don't see it that way.

DadsPumpkin: Other people need to get a grip!

AppleOrchardKaty: You think you have the right to decide for yourself, right?

DadsPumpkin: Duh!

AppleOrchardKaty: The boy does, too.

DadsPumpkin: Grr!

AppleOrchardKaty: It's true. If he doesn't think it's right, for whatever reason, that's his decision.

DadsPumpkin: 🤔🤔🤔

AppleOrchardKaty: Your dad usually says 'I hate you' when he knows the other person is correct and doesn't like it.

DadsPumpkin: I got my point across!

AppleOrchardKaty: You did.

DadsPumpkin: I can't wait to go to Sweden! People there are rational! And treat teenagers like people!

AppleOrchardKaty: In a few years, it won't be an issue.

DadsPumpkin: That's what Dad said!

AppleOrchardKaty: Your dad is pretty smart!

DadsPumpkin: For a dumb boy!

AppleOrchardKaty: All I can say is to be patient. It's not like you don't have plenty of opportunities with boys closer to your age.

DadsPumpkin: Oh, shut up! 😊😊 <3

AppleOrchardKaty: LOL! Thank you for putting the heart there! Are you still seeing Peter?

DadsPumpkin: Yes, but he's too much a mamma's boy!

AppleOrchardKaty: I think you're judging him too harshly. He's only fourteen, right?

DadsPumpkin: Yes. But why do you think I want someone older? It's not like I'm going for someone in the thirties or forties!

AppleOrchardKaty: I understand, but you know how society is.

DadsPumpkin: Unfortunately.

AppleOrchardKaty: I need to get to work! Chat soon! L&r!

DadsPumpkin: L&r!

I closed my IM client, then checked my email. There was nothing new, so I decided to write to Fatimah. She was married now, and I was very curious about how she was doing, though I knew we both had to be careful what we wrote to each other. I took out my good writing paper and a pen and composed a letter to

her. I had just finished when my phone rang. I saw in the display it was Tiffany calling.

"What's up?" I asked, after opening the phone.

"Want to hang out?" Tiffany asked.

"Sure! Peter bailed on me. Something about picking up his grandparents at the airport."

"Grandparents over hot sex? What a loser!"

I giggled, "We agree! I'll be over in ten minutes."

"Cool!"

I closed the phone, addressed the envelope, then went downstairs and put the right amount of postage on it. I put it in the 'outgoing' mail basket, let Mom know I was going to Tiffany's, then left the house.

 Jesse

"What do you think my dad would say if he saw me lying naked on top of you?" Viktoria asked after our third round.

"I don't even want to think about it!" I declared.

"You saw *Footloose*, right?"

"I would strongly advise against you standing in the nave and announcing to your dad that you aren't a virgin!"

"What could he do?"

"Ground you until you're eighteen! Seriously, do not invite trouble! You can't even tell him you're seeing me without getting into huge trouble!"

"You make me feel so good, Jesse! I wish I could live here with you!"

"I'd say 'go ask your dad' but that would be dumb beyond all belief! And you know I'm not interested in having an exclusive relationship."

"But you'd get to have sex with me all the time!" she exclaimed, wriggling her body and grinding against me.

"I'm not ready for that kind of relationship. Remember what I said? It's just casual and I want to keep it that way. I don't plan to get married until I graduate from college and have my first job. That's six years from now."

"You won't forget me, will you?" Viktoria asked.

"No. But you know the difficulties."

"Maybe I'll go to the same college you go to! If we're living in the dorms, my dad has NO control over what I do!"

"I can't promise anything for the future, but I certainly wouldn't object!"

Viktoria giggled, "Having a sexy blond naked in your bed and willing to do anything you want is enticing?"

"Very!"

"Would you like a sexy blowjob before we shower?"

"Do I look like an idiot?" I chuckled.

"Well..." Viktoria teased as she slid down and took me into her mouth.



September 9, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

After school on Monday, I went to the classroom where the Photography Club met and sat down to wait for Mr. Tavares to show up. There were seven other kids in the room so far, five boys and two girls. A few more students came in, making it eight boys and three girls, counting me, and then Mr. Tavares walked in.

"I see we have three new faces," he said. "We'll take a few minutes for everyone to introduce themselves. Say your name, your grade, and how long you've been taking photographs with a good camera. We'll start with Bob."

"Robert Hansen," a brown-haired boy said. "Sophomore, and I've been taking photos with an SLR for about six years."

"John next," Mr. Tavares said, "then just go row by row."

"John Washington, Junior, two years," a tall black kid said.

"Meg Nagle, Senior, three years," a nerdy-looking girl with black hair and frumpy clothes said.

"Greg Moore," a short, stocky boy said, "Freshman, I've only ever used a pocket camera before today.

"Birgit Adams," I said. "Freshman, and I've only ever used a Pocket Instamatic."

"Ivan Gerasimov, Junior, five years," a tall, dark-haired boy with a hint of a Russian accent said.

"Kelly Graham, Sophomore, two years," a girl shorter than me with short-cropped hair said.

"Bill Blake, Senior, six years," a heavysset kid with thick glasses said.

"Vijay Sharma, Junior, two years," an obviously Indian guy about my height said.

"Tim Thompson, Freshman, absolute beginner," a short kid who looked like he was about twelve said.

"Thank you," Mr. Tavares said. "I have all your permission slips, so we're good. Does everyone have a camera with them?"

Everyone nodded.

"Our first day is going to be review for those who have participated before, but review is always good. Take out your cameras and we'll discuss the parts of a camera, how to load film, and the settings you can make for exposure."

I took a notebook from my book bag, along with a pen, and put them on my desk so I could take notes, then took my new camera from its bag. About an hour later, after a dizzying amount of information was imparted, I put everything away and left the classroom.

"Birgit?" I heard Fangsu call from behind me.

I stopped, turned, and the boy named Bob walked right into me.

"Oops, sorry," he said. "You stopped short!"

"It's OK," I said. "See you next time?"

"Sure."

He kept walking, and I went to where Fangsu was waiting.

"Math club ended, and I needed a drink. Shall we walk home?"

"Yes!"



September 10, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Remind me why I get up at 3:45am?" Nicholas groaned when he got into the SUV on Tuesday morning.

"Because you love hockey!" I said. "And because we need the practice so we can win this weekend!"

"Yes, but 5:00am ice time? Ugh."

"It's been that way since before I was on the team," I replied. "It's the time the school could get years ago and nobody with a later time that would work has dropped their time."

"How are you always so happy this early?"

"Because I love hockey!" I replied. "And I also make sure I go to bed early enough to get plenty of sleep. Remember, for Friday, you need to wear a coat and tie to school."

"I remember."

"Is your family coming to the game on Saturday?"

"Yes. Tom took one of his Kelly Days so he could be there. Does your dad come to all your games?"

"As many as he can, but to every playoff game. He usually misses two or three a year because of going to Mayo or traveling for work or his other business. The softball team will be at most of our games, along with some of the cheer team."

"There are a couple of really cute Freshmen cheerleaders and softball players!" Nicholas said.

"Talk to them," I replied. "They like nice guys, especially athletes!"

Coach pushed us hard at practice, which was to be expected, given we were playing our nemesis, St. Rita, on Saturday. The team had gelled really well, but the true test would be in a game. We'd failed miserably in our final game the previous year, and we needed to redeem ourselves by beating St. Rita and Lane Tech. When practice finished, we went back to my house, put our gear in the drying room, then headed to Kenwood Academy.

"Hi, Jesse!" Brooke exclaimed when she saw me at my locker.

"Hi!"

"Math homework together after school?" she suggested.

"Absolutely!" I agreed.

Brook winked, licked her lips and walked away. I closed my locker, then headed to homeroom with Libby.

"Math homework?" Libby teased.

"She likes integrating!"

"I bet!"



September 11, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Wednesday morning at school we had a moment of silence to remember the victims of the September 11th attacks. I was annoyed that we *still* hadn't found Osama bin Laden, but I felt Bush was more interested in invading Iraq than finding bin Laden in Afghanistan. I met Fangsu for lunch, and we agreed to meet after our club meetings. When I went to Photography Club, I decided to sit down next to Bob, the boy who had run into me on Monday.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," Bob replied. "Sorry about Monday."

"It's OK! It's not like you hurt me, knocked me down, or even knocked stuff out of my hands! And I did kind of stop right in front of you."

"Where did you go to school last year?"

"La Salle. My mom is a chemistry professor and Assistant Department Chair here, and she decided to transfer me."

"My dad is a history professor and my mom is a Fine Arts professor. What does your dad do?"

"He owns a computer software and consulting company he started with friends when they graduated from college."

"Why did you decide to join the Photography Club?" Bob asked.

"I wanted something to do, but not an academic club and I didn't want to play sports because I take karate lessons."

"What belt do you have?"

"I'm first kyu, so brown. I'll test for my black belt soon!"

"Now I'm REALLY sorry I ran into you!"

I laughed, "Don't worry about it!"

Mr. Tavares came into the room and we had to stop talking.

"Today we're going to take our first photos, and all of them will be inside the school. I'd like you to pair off, though one group will need three, and at least one person in each group needs to be experienced. You'll have thirty minutes to take twenty-four shots of interesting things in the school."

"You and me?" I whispered to Bob.

He nodded.

"Pair up," Mr. Tavares said, "but if you can't work it out, I'll assign partners randomly."

"Birgit and I are a pair," Bob announced.

The others paired off, and it didn't surprise me that Kelly and Meg paired off with each other. I always thought it was dumb to pair off with other girls when there were boys around, because even though boys were often dumb, they did have their good points.

"Looks like everyone is set," Mr. Tavares said. "See you back here in forty minutes."

Everyone left the room, and I looked to Bob.

"What would be considered interesting?" I asked.

"That's part of the assignment," he replied. "You have to decide what's interesting and use the photo to express a feeling or idea or create an emotion. I'm sure you've heard the saying 'A picture is worth a thousand words', right?"

"Yes."

"It's totally true. Think about the pictures telling a story. You could take pictures of the different classroom doors, and so long as you set the shot correctly, it would be interesting."

"Doors? Seriously?"

"A lot of famous artists did things like paint the same subject in different light and different seasons, including doors, roads, buildings, and so on. It's not the object, it's the story you're telling."

"Uhm, I'm not sure how to start," I said.

"Let's walk around and you can get some ideas," Bob suggested. "We have time."

We walked around the building and I wondered what I could take pictures of that would be interesting. As I thought about it, I noticed that every classroom was configured slightly differently and had an idea.

"Classrooms," I said. "Photographed from the hall through an open door, or through the glass in the door."

"That's a great idea!" Bob agreed. "Go ahead."

"How do I know I've taken a good picture? Or if I have the camera settings correct?"

"After they're developed, Mr. Tavares will look at them and give advice. You'll get a feel for it. I'm not supposed to tell you, because according to Mr. Tavares you learn better by experimenting."

I almost laughed, because that was SO true about a lot of things, especially sex!

"This would be easier with a digital camera," I said, "because you can see the picture! My dad has one."

"I have one, too," Bob replied. "My dad bought me a Canon EOS D60 in May."

"My dad bought the same one when we bought this camera."

"Go ahead and take your first shot," he prompted.

I stood and looked at the open door and tried to decide how to 'frame' the picture as Mr. Tavares had called it. I adjusted the camera settings, then put the camera up to my face to take the first picture. Just as I was about to snap it, I heard shutter noises from Bob's camera and turned.

"What picture did you just take?" I asked.

He blushed slightly, "You, getting ready to take your photo. You're the most interesting thing in the school right now! You're not upset, are you?"

"Are you going to take a picture of me every time I take a picture of a classroom?"

"Would you be upset if I did?"

"No."

That's what we did. I took my photos, trying different angles and Bob snapped pictures of me, and I was sure Bob stared at my butt in my tight jeans while he was doing that. When we finished, we went back to the classroom and Mr. Tavares asked us to give him the film canisters, and he'd take them to be developed. He'd pay, and then we'd pay him.

"See you Monday," I said to Bob when we left the classroom. "I'm meeting my friend."

"OK," he agreed.

We went our separate ways, and I met up with Fangsu so we could walk to my house to do our homework.

 Albert

"Hi, Albert," Grandpa Al said when he opened the door to his house. "Come in."

I walked into the house and he offered me something to drink and I asked for sparkling water.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm doing OK. Thank you for coming."

"I couldn't not," I said. "I had to make sure you were doing OK."

"I miss her," Grandpa Al said, handing me a bottle of San Pellegrino.

"Thanks," I said. "I just wish they'd find Osama bin Laden and put him down like the rabid dog he is!"

"Spoke like a future fighter pilot," Grandpa said.

"Give me the mission. I'll fire a missile up his six or drop a bomb into whatever cave he's in."

"I think you have a few years before you're ready to do that."

"Unfortunately. But show me where he is and I'll get a light plane and drop a grenade on him!"

"How is your flight training going with Commander Shaughnessy?"

"Great! She let me take off, fly, and land both directions Labor Day weekend. I worked the radio and did everything except file the flight plan, which she had to do."

"That's great, Albert!"

"You should come with us next time! We're flying somewhere during Christmas break, but I haven't decided where."

"I'd enjoy that."



September 12, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

On Thursday, I left the office just after 1:00pm to drive home, then walk to the medical school for the first critical thinking seminar. I met Jessica outside the building and she walked me to the lecture hall where the seminar was meeting. Al and Malik Washington were waiting outside the lecture hall.

"Hi, Steve," Doctor Washington said.

"Hi, Doc."

"I was surprised to hear from your sister," he said. "Your doing?"

"She did speak to me about it, but it was her idea, not mine. I endorsed her choice, of course, and I hope you'll do it."

"I ran it by the ethics committee and there's no conflict, so I'd be honored."

"Thanks. Al, how many students?"

"Eighty-six. We haven't washed anyone out in the first two weeks! Of course, even though this isn't optional, there are always students who blow off class."

"Any last-minute changes?"

"No. You have a free hand; freer than any of us would have because you're a guest lecturer."

"Be gentle, Tiger," Jessica said mirthfully. "They're all babies!"

"Twenty-two-year-old babies!"

"Let's go in," she said.

The four of us went into the lecture hall and Jessica went to a lectern. She tapped a wooden pointer on the lectern to get the students attention and they quieted down.

"Good afternoon," she said. "This seminar series is part of your medical education, and is to help you develop a skill that is in short supply, and which is not really taught in High School or university -- critical thinking. Leading this course is my husband, Founder and President of NIKA Consulting, Steve Adams. Steve?"

I stepped up to the lectern.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Who here thinks they could win an argument against my fourteen-year-old daughter?"

There was a lot of laughter.

"Only an idiot tries to argue with a teenage girl!" a young man in the front row said.

"Stand up and give your name, please."

"Terry Andersen."

"Hi, Terry. Why do you think that?"

"Because I don't know anybody more irrational than a teenage girl!"

"Have you seen *Crimson Tide*?" I asked.

He laughed, "The captain says, about teenage girls, that they may not have a brain in their head but they do know all the boys want to, er, have sex with them."

"We're all adults here," I said. "Nobody is going to get on your case for using an English word. That said, my fourteen-year-old daughter is a straight-A student, participates in a philosophy club with her friends, and holds a brown belt in karate. Still think you could beat her in a debate?"

"Why do I sense a setup here?" he asked.

"And right there, you used critical thinking to reevaluate your earlier statement. Go ahead and sit down."

He took his seat.

"Every single one of you is highly intelligent, or you wouldn't be here, and that's enough to be a good physician, but if you want to be an excellent physician, you'll need more than just book smarts and clinical experience. You'll be able to make a differential diagnosis from a memorized list many times, but what happens what that fails you? At that point, it's all critical thinking. It's all putting together potentially disparate facts into a cohesive pattern which helps reveal the answer.

"What is critical thinking? One definition that applies to medicine is that it is *purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based*. In other words, being able to synthesize an answer from evidence, both direct and inferred, and come up with a coherent answer. That is the very essence of the diagnostic method.

"Our seminars will not focus on medicine; you'll get plenty of that from your professors and from Residents and Attendings. Each meeting we'll have a debate, where I pick a topic and you take a position, and try to defend it against my critique. I don't care what side you take, I'll argue the opposite. Today, we'll begin with a question from history -- should the US have dropped the atomic bombs on Japan. Who wants to debate me?"

"I'll take that challenge!" Terry declared, standing up.

XXI. The Return of the Well-Oiled Machine

September 12, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"I'd say that went very well for a first session," Al said after the seminar. "You managed to really engage several students, and everyone was paying attention."

"I'm curious," Doctor Washington said. "What's your actual opinion?"

I chuckled, "What? You don't think 'Yes, by all means sir, drop that fucker, twice!' is my actual position?"

"No, I don't."

"I side with Commander Hunter, though my position is that nuclear weapons are terror weapons, and thus, using them is always wrong. I would prefer they didn't even exist, but as they do, then the only way to prevent their use is Mutual Assured Destruction."

"And all those Marines, Naval aviators, and Army infantrymen and airmen who would have died in an invasion?"

"I can't support killing several hundred thousand civilians because of decisions by their totalitarian military government. Striking military targets is one thing; striking civilian targets, be they in Japan, Germany, Afghanistan, Serbia, Iraq, or any other place, is never acceptable. The type of weapon is irrelevant, be it nuclear, biological, chemical, incendiary, or explosive.

"With regard to the actual use of the Hiroshima bomb, it's easy for me to sit here in 2002 and pass judgment on Harry Truman. Given his circumstances, I could

understand why he ordered it, even if I don't support it. I would have arranged for a remote demonstration on an atoll and invited the Japanese to witness it under a temporary armistice. I believe that would have been sufficient. But, as I said, I understand Truman's thinking.

"As for the second bomb, it was completely unnecessary. Indications were Japan was ready to surrender after the first bomb, but the second bomb was dropped to intimidate the Soviet Union. It was completely unnecessary as a way to force Japan to surrender, as they were already moving that direction. That makes Nagasaki mass murder in a way only a nation-state can achieve."

"You did an amazing job defending the opposite position."

"Thanks. Did you serve at all?"

"Four years, during the Korean War. I chose not to take an available deferment and completed my Residency at Bethesda Naval Hospital. When I left the service, I took an Attending role in McKinley, Ohio. Ohio was home for me, just as it was for you, though Cleveland, not Cincinnati. I was offered the position here in the mid-80s. Anyway, we'll see you next week!"

"See you at home, Tiger," Jessica said.

I shook hands with Al and Doctor Washington, hugged Jessica, gave her a kiss, then headed home.

 Birgit

My mobile phone rang as I was walking home with Fangsu, Ashley, and her new friend, Chadrina. I slipped it from my pocket, saw who was calling, and quickly opened the phone.

"This is Birgit!"

"Hi, this is Phillip."

"Hi! What's up?" I asked hopefully.

"Would you want to meet at Starbucks on Sunday morning?"

The answer was obviously 'yes' but there was no way I was going to be overeager!

"Promise you won't say anything about me being fourteen?"

"I promise."

"Then yes. Same time?"

"Sure."

"See you!" I exclaimed happily. "Bye!"

"Bye!"

I closed the phone and slipped it back into my pocket.

"Who was that?" Ashley asked.

"Philip," I replied.

"Who's that?" Fangsu asked.

"A guy I met last week," I replied.

"is he older?"

"A bit," I replied. "But I'm just having coffee and scones with him on Sunday."

Both Fangsu and Chadrima came to our house to do homework, and I wrote my date with Philip on the calendar. I was surprised to find Dad home.

"Hi!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here, remember?" Dad replied.

I rolled my eyes, "I meant why are you home?"

"Today was the seminar at the medical school. I decided to come home rather than go back to the office."

"How many female medical students did you meet?" I asked with a silly smile.

"Zero, the way you mean, nosy daughter! The class was about half female. But I'm an instructor, so it would be totally inappropriate to do what you implied."

"What-ever!" I giggled. "Philip called!"

"Just be careful, Pumpkin."

"I know," I replied with smirk, "I'll keep my lips sealed..."

"DON'T SAY IT!" Dad ordered, but he was laughing.

"You're just no fun, Dad!" I giggled. "I need to go do homework."

"Yes, you do!"

I went over, hugged him, he kissed my forehead, and I went to the kitchen to get a snack for Fangsu and me, then went to the sunroom to do my homework.



September 14, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Guys, I'm not going to make a long speech," I said in the locker room before our game on Saturday morning.

They all cheered.

"We have one job," I said. "Win the whole freaking thing!"

"RAH!" they all exclaimed.

"That's all I have to say! Let's hit the ice!"

"RAH!"

We left the locker room and headed to the ice for pre-game warmups. I looked up in the stands and saw about half the softball team and most of the cheer team.

"Any last minute advice?" Nicholas asked.

"The circular black thing goes into the net guarded by the guy with a white jersey."

"Very funny!"

"Just play your lane, use your passing lanes, put the puck on net, and when they have the puck, back check and keep your stick active."

After stretching and a warm-up skate, Pete stood in net for shooting practice. Halfway through, we switched and everyone took turns shooting at me. When the horn sounded, we collected the pucks, then skated over to the bench, with everyone taking a seat except the starters, who stayed on the ice in front of the bench. Coach reminded us not to take penalties, which is what had killed us in the playoffs, and when the horn sounded, we skated out to our positions to wait for the puck to drop. I roughed up the ice in the crease, took my usual stance for face-offs and waited for the referee.

He dropped the puck, Jack won the face-off to Freddy, who skated forward over the blue line, passed across the red line to Tom, who entered the St. Rita zone. Tom passed back to Mike at the blue line, Mike passed to Freddy at the top of the circle, and Freddy one-timed it past the St. Rita goalie just thirteen seconds into the game.

Our cheering section leapt to their feet and screamed their appreciation, while the guys all surrounded Freddy. I saluted him with my stick, and everyone lined up for a face-off without any line changes. The next ten minutes were hard fought, mostly between the blue lines, with each team only getting two shots.

Everything changed eleven minutes into the period when St. Rita took a major penalty for boarding. That gave us five minutes of 'score all you can' powerplay. Coach decided to go for the jugular, and put out the first O line, Nicholas, and Freddy as the lone defenseman. It was a good strategy, because Nicholas was fast, could play both O and D, and had a better shot than any of the defensemen except Freddy.

The strategy worked, and by the time the five-minute major expired, we were ahead 4-0, with Freddy, Nicholas, and Jack all scoring. The rest of the period was relatively calm, as we didn't press, playing dump and chase whenever we had the puck in the neutral zone. We took our four-goal lead into the locker room, having outshot St. Rita sixteen to four.

"We can't let up," I said to Freddy, Jack, and Nicholas as we grabbed bottles of cold water.

"Another four goals?" Nicholas asked.

"That would be nice," I declared, "But I was thinking more of not letting them get back into the game!"

 Steve

"Why couldn't they play like this in the playoff game?" Josie grouched.

"Whatever happened then is in the past," I replied. "They're focused and not screwing around. I haven't seen Jesse this focused in a long time."

"He's determined to win the statewide championship before he graduates," Jennifer interjected. "And he's been taking an active role in helping Coach Nelson."

"He knows he's not headed to the NHL as a player, so he's working on his coaching skills. When the time comes, I'll make the calls to get him an interview with the Penguins."

Jennifer and Josie laughed.

"Your ultimate revenge!" Jennifer said.

"The Pens are the only team where I have any access, and that's through Ned Jenkins in Pittsburgh. We could ask Cindi if there are any other firms which represent NHL teams."

"Or just ask Samantha to buy him a team!" Josie said.

"That might be a bit much, even for her!"

The teams came back on the ice, and the second period began, and it was relatively boring, as Jesse's team simply played solid defense and used a dump-and-chase offense. The period ended as it has begun, 4-0. The third was only a bit better, with our team getting a goal, and Jesse having to turn away some furious attacks. He stoned St. Rita's best shooters, and the team closed out a 5-0 victory to start the season.

 Jesse

"Twelve more, just like this one!" Pete declared when we left the ice. "Then we do the same thing in the playoffs."

"No letting off the gas, period!" DeShawn exclaimed as we headed into the locker room. "We're going to kick some serious butt!"

"Def!" Tomás agreed. "And I saw all the hot chicks here cheering for us! Time to do some serious scoring!"

Freddy laughed, "Good luck with that! They're all here for Jesse!"

"I'm happy to share," I chuckled. "And I'm not dating anyone regularly since CeCe left."

"Have you heard from her?" Freddy asked.

"She texts and we chat on AIM. She's loving Arizona State, and she's the starting first baseman."

"Great job, Men!" Coach Nelson said once we were all in the locker room.

"Everyone played great today! Game pucks to Freddy for his pair of goals and to Jesse for his shutout."

Everyone cheered.

"Next weekend we have Lane Tech. I'll see you men at practice on Monday morning!"

"RAH!" everyone shouted.

Nicholas and I showered, dressed, and left the locker room. I met up with my moms and dad, while Nicholas went with Tom and Bethany, who didn't come anywhere near my family. I wished that wasn't the case, but my moms said Bethany had basically doubled-down on her complete change of opinion on teen sex, and sex in general.

"Great job, Jesse!" Mom One exclaimed.

"We played like a well-oiled machine today," I replied. "Not like Dad described our playoff game last year!"

"No sand in the gears today!" Dad declared. "And Nicholas had his first goal."

"Thanks for coming, Dad. I know it's a big deal to miss karate practice."

"Priorities," Dad said with a smile.

And he had his right, I thought. He almost never missed anything any of us kids did, whether it was hockey, drama, or robotics, he was almost always there. My sisters didn't do many outside activities besides karate, and of course, he was there. Albert was the outlier, but he had taken dad flying a few times, and, of course, Dad went to awards ceremonies for Scouts.

"What's on tap for this afternoon?" Mom One asked.

"A nap!" I declared. "And then I'm going to win the poker tournament!"

"Your dad isn't playing, right?"

"Right. I want him to, but the rest of the men want a chance to lose to me!"

"Well, if ego counts for anything," Mom Two said, shaking her head, "you're in good shape!"

"I'm just that good!" I grinned.

My moms groaned, but my dad laughed, and we headed out to the parking lot.

 Birgit

"I need to take two rolls of film," I said at lunch. "I need interesting subjects."

"Me!" Ashley declared, giggling.

"Cameras steal your soul," Dad declared.

"I'd have to believe in a soul to believe that!" I declared. "You'll let me take pictures of you, right?"

"She's not a ginger, Dad," Albert smirked. "So you don't need to worry about her stealing your soul!"

"Blondes have WAY more fun!" I declared.

"Uh-huh," Ashley smirked. "I say *strawberry blondes* have way more fun!"

"I say there's WAY too much estrogen at this table!" Albert declared.

"Not possible!" Stephie replied. "Even an ounce of testosterone is too much!"

"What about Dad?" I asked.

"He's still a boy! You call him a 'dumb boy' all the time!"

"Stephie-chan, your dad is a wonderful man!" Yuriko interjected. "He is kind, loving, and intelligent."

"He's still a boy!"

"Let's talk after lunch, please."

Stephie rolled her eyes, but I hoped Yuriko could beat some sense into her, because her 'I hate men' attitude was totally annoying.

"What are the parameters of the assignment?" Dad asked.

"That's it!" I replied. "Just 'interesting subjects'. Mr. Tavares wouldn't say more, because he said he didn't want to interfere with our creativity or artistic ideas."

"Autistic is more like it!" Albert observed with a smirk.

"Love you too," I said, sticking out my tongue.

"Very adult, Birgit," Ashley giggled.

"Albert," Dad interjected, "I would strongly prefer we don't make light of mental illness."

"Sorry, Dad," Albert said. "I thought it was funny."

Dad smiled, "It was, and I didn't tell you not to do it, I simply expressed my preference."

"Your 'preferences' carry the weight of commands!" Albert declared. "At least according to Birgit!"

"If you get your worldview from Birgit," Ashley teased, "then I feel VERY sorry for you, Albert!"

"Hey!" I protested. "What is this? National Pick on Birgit Day?"

"That's every day, Sis!" Albert smirked.

"ANYWAY!" I replied. "Before I was so rudely interrupted by my annoying siblings, I'm not sure what pictures to take."

"When she was an architecture student, Anala drew pictures of every bridge over the Chicago River from Lake Michigan to the Congress Expressway. And she drew multiple versions of each bridge, at various times of the day and in various weather conditions."

"Hmm," I mused. "So like the classrooms. But I don't get to see the results of those until Monday, and I have to shoot before then. He should have waited to give the assignment."

"But he didn't," Dad replied. "Which I believe means he wants to see more of what you can do on your own. Remember, the best way to learn is experimentation. You know how the camera works, so now you have to apply your creativity and ideas of art to taking great photos."

"Birgit, what about some of the unique houses in Hyde Park?" Suzanne suggested.

"Or the different shops along Hyde Park Avenue," Dad suggested.

"I don't know," I said. "It seems boring compared to something like the Grand Canyon of the Statue of Liberty."

"And that's the secret to success," Dad said. "You make the photos interesting through your artistic abilities."

"Math and science are SO much easier!" I protested.

"Which is why I'm happy you've taken on this challenge," Dad replied. "It'll expand your horizons."

"Ugh," I groused. "I think I'm going to call Bob after lunch."

"Just have fun," Dad advised. "That's part of it, too."

 Stephie

"«猿も木から落ちる» ('Saru mo ki kara ochiru') Stephie-chan," Yuriko said. "In English, it would be 'Even monkeys fall from trees' and means 'anyone can make a mistake'. You believe Nicholas made a mistake, and now you are making one. You must remember «因果応報» ('inga ōhō'), which is 'cause brings result' and means 'what goes around comes around'."

"But boys are dumb!" I protested.

Yuriko smiled, "And it is a wise woman who knows that, but does not say it! Instead, she uses her power as a woman to help the man see what is right! That is how it works in Japan."

"Oh, right!" I said rolling my eyes. "The karate school is run by guys and only guys are allowed to train there!"

Yuriko smiled, "You have never met Emiko-san or Sakuro-chan, and I think you should. You would learn much from them. Hiro-sama would never do anything that would displease Emiko-san, and Hideki-sama would never do anything that would displease Sakuro-chan! And that is the secret! Your dad would never do anything that would displease your moms or the other women close to him, most importantly, Liz."

"He does whatever he wants!" I protested.

"No, he doesn't," Yuriko replied. "He thinks about what your moms or Liz or his sister would say, and takes that into account. And it is very easy to get the truth from a man."

She had me curious.

"How?"

Yuriko smiled, "When you are engaged in love, and you are in the superior position with him inside you, after he has already had one release! It is, as Emiko-san has said, difficult for men to lie in such a position!"

"Seriously? Sex is truth serum?"

"We have to use every power we have to help the men we love. Of course, it's different with your dad."

"Not for you!" I smirked.

"Yes, but you know what I meant, Stephie-chan! And I do not mean you use the art of love on every boy or man, or in every situation. You must be subtle in everything. I can help you learn to be a *proper* woman if you wish. And I believe that if you change your attitude and your approach, you will find Nicholas-chan receptive."

"He's an idiot!" I groused.

"Perhaps so," Yuriko said with a smile. "But you obviously love him!"

"Says who?"

"If you didn't love him, you wouldn't be so upset! Do you want my help?"

I thought about what she'd said, and she wasn't wrong about me loving Nicholas. But he had severe testosterone poisoning, and I wasn't sure there was a cure! But maybe Yuriko could help.

"Yes."

 Jesse

There was a knock at the door of my room after I'd been asleep for about an hour.

"What?" I called out.

"You have a visitor," Mom Two said.

"Who?" I asked.

"Francesca."

I suppressed a groan, got out of bed, and opened the door.

"Did she say what she wanted?" I asked.

"You!" Mom Two declared.

"Obviously," I replied. "I just...never mind. Let me see what she wants."

We went downstairs to the living room, where Francesca was sitting on the couch with Mom One.

"We'll go next door," Mom Two said.

I was grateful, because I didn't want to give Francesca any wrong impressions, and sitting in the living room was a better option than going downstairs.

"Hi," I said as Mom One got up and left with Mom Two.

"Hi," Francesca said. "I wanted to apologize for what I said to you back in March."

"Apology accepted," I replied. "How have you been?"

"OK, I guess. I miss you, Jesse. We were friends forever, and now I don't even see you. I know it's my mom's fault."

"Is she still in prison?" I asked.

"For another year," Francesca replied. "I only know because Ms. Meyer gave Dad all the information. My mom isn't even allowed to write me letters or talk to me before I turn eighteen."

"November of next year, right? You'll be seventeen this year, if I remember correctly."

"Yes. She'll be out of prison in June, and then on probation for two years. Dad says she'll need permission from her probation officer to contact me, and the probation officer will ask if I want her to."

"Do you?"

"No."

"May I suggest at some point you try to reconcile?"

"Why would I do that?!" Francesca asked in surprise.

"Because you're the better person. You have plenty of time to think about it, but I think you should do it."

"You're weird, Jesse."

I smiled, "I know. We Adams/Block/Clarke men wear it as a badge of honor!"

"Could we get together sometime? Just as friends?"

I had a suspicion that it was a camel's nose under the tent situation, but I also couldn't be mean to her. I couldn't think of a reason to not invite her to join our group on Friday nights, except for what I felt was her obvious desire to get back together. In the end, though, that was on her, not me.

"You're certainly welcome to join our Friday night group if your dad is OK with it."

"Dad pretty much lets me do what I want, so long as I'm home on time and he knows where I'm going and what I'm doing."

"Basically the same as my moms and my dad," I replied.

"Nobody is like your moms and your dad! But he's nothing like my mom, and I can see why he divorced her."

Which was a very different spin from what I'd heard when I was younger. Francesca's mom had accused her husband of cheating on her, but now I wondered if it wasn't actually Francesca's mom who was the problem, and that her dad had behaved properly until they had separated. It was none of my business, but it would certainly fit the facts better than the story I'd heard when I was younger.

"Next Friday, we'll meet at Jade Court, on Harper, just south of 52nd, at 5:30pm. I'm not sure what we're doing after dinner yet. What time do you have to be home?"

"By the city curfew, unless I make arrangements with my dad to pick me up. When will you decide what to do?"

"Usually at dinner. Most likely we'll come back to my dad's house if there's nothing playing at the movies we want to see. And most of us are under seventeen, so we can't see R-rated movies in the theater, but we can via Netflix discs, HBO, or Showtime."

"OK. Thanks for being nice, Jesse. I really am sorry I called you names."

"Forgiven and forgotten," I replied. "I don't see any reason we can't be friends."

"Good! Dad said I should ask for your hockey schedule. He likes High School hockey, and Maria obviously doesn't have a team!"

"I'll bring one on Friday. Our next game is next Saturday morning at 8:00am at Johnny's Ice House against Lane Tech."

"I'm going to home then," Francesca said. "I'll see you on Friday!"

I walked her to the door, and after she left, I went back upstairs because I had a bit of reading to do before Monday. About fifteen minutes later, my moms came to the door of my room.

"How did it go?" Mom Two asked.

"She's changed strategies," I replied. "She wants to be friends and to hang out with our group."

"And?" Mom One asked.

"And nothing," I replied. "I'm happy to be friends with her. I mean, we were friends from the time I was three months old until her bat shit crazy mom boarded the express train to crazy town and arrived before Rachel's mom! But anything more, well, you know I don't want to be exclusive."

"That would interfere with your math homework," Mom One teased.

"And your trip to Japan next Summer," Mom Two added. "And Scarlett. And..."

"Enough!" I declared. "It's not about that, it's about making a commitment I am not interested in making at this point, to anyone. Even CeCe, who was about as low maintenance as any girl I know, understood and accepted that. I mean, sure, she talked about it, but she knows I have two more years of High School and four years of college before I'm going to get married, at a minimum."

"And, of course, your dad's pick, Larisa!" Mom One added.

"She's OK," I replied with a slight smile. "But her dad..."

"Your dad managed to fend off the KGB!" Mom One said.

"Katya is a pussycat compared to General Dmitry!" I countered.

My moms laughed, then headed downstairs and I picked up my book to continue reading.

 Birgit

I called Bob after I arrived home from Dad's private karate class and discovered he lived in Bridgeport, which meant taking the L or a bus, or getting a ride. It was Guys' Night and Girls' Night Out, so a ride home was out of the question, which meant I'd need to be home by the city curfew because no rides would be

available. Bob's parents weren't home, so he couldn't get a ride, which meant we'd have to use the CTA or Metra.

"Are you allowed to go into the Loop?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How about we meet at State and Van Buren in about an hour?" I suggested. "I'm going to take Metra Electric and you can take the Red or Blue Line. We can get food and I can take my photos."

"I'll bring my DSLR, because you can use that to judge the correct settings for your camera."

"Is that cheating?"

"No. You could use a light meter to do some of the same things, but this would let you see how you've framed it before you take the shot. I don't think Mr. Tavares would consider that cheating."

"OK. I'm leaving in a few minutes. See you in an hour!"

"See you!"

I hung up and went to Dad's study where he was speaking with Avanti to let him know I was going to meet Bob.

"What time do you plan to be home?" he asked.

"Before curfew. I'll leave the Loop by 8:00pm, which means I'll have no trouble getting home before 10:00pm."

"If something comes up, just call," Dad said. "I'm not playing in the poker tournament tonight."

"The men begged for mercy?" I asked with a silly smile.

"They asked nicely! Have fun!"

"Bye, Dad!"

I left his study, wrote on the board in the kitchen where I was going, then left the house to walk to the Metra Electric line to take me into the Loop.

 Steve

"Dad," Ashely said from the door to my study, "sorry to interrupt, but Aunt Bethany and Tom are here."

"Thanks, Cinderella," I replied, then said to Avanti, "You'll need to excuse me."

"It's OK. Mom will be here in about ten minutes. I'll go hang out with the girls in the sunroom."

She left, and I went to the foyer.

"Hi," I said. "Bethany, I need to advise you that I've been advised by my attorneys not to speak with you unless you provide an unconditional release of liability for both Samantha and me for anything to do with your books, your publisher, or any of the intellectual property."

"Seriously?" she asked, sounding annoyed. "That is what you lead with?"

"Once you had your attorney threaten me, yes. Anything I say could be used in a suit you might bring, and right now, Samantha and I are in a position where we can't lose. Why would I jeopardize that?"

"I told you this was a waste of time," Bethany said to Tom.

"Steve," Tom pleaded, "can we be reasonable?"

"I'm not sure what you want me to do, Tom," I replied. "Bethany has to promise not to sue either Samantha or me, and offer a complete release."

"I don't give a fuck about the book now," Bethany growled.

"Bethany," Tom counseled. "Let's not make things worse."

I had a strong indication that her intent was to write another book, and she was certainly free to do that, though it couldn't have the same title as her current book, nor could she call it revision. What she *could* do was add a jacket blurb along the lines of 'By the author of...' and list her two books. Jacob Goldberg felt she could most likely use that in her marketing collateral without any real risk, as it was a true statement and was not using any of the intellectual property she'd assigned to her publisher.

"If that's the case," I said. "There should be no problem with a release that applied only to the books and the intellectual property."

"This is a waste of time, Tom!" Bethany said angrily. "He's being his usual obstinate, unreasonable self!"

I felt responding to that would only make things worse, so I simply remained silent.

"Steve," Tom said, "is there any assurance I can give, short of what you're asking for?"

"Normally, I'd say 'yes'," I replied. "But the virtual steam coming from your wife's ears and the daggers she's looking at me say that she won't abide by anything you promise in that regard."

"Asshole!" Bethany growled.

"Tom, I suggest we aren't going to make any progress now. You're welcome for Guys' Night, and Bethany is welcome for Girls' Night Out."

"It'll be a cold day in hell!" Bethany declared.

She turned on her heel and moved to the door. She yanked it open and stormed out.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean it to come to this."

"You know you can fix it," Tom said.

"But at what cost?" I queried.

"Oh, I know," he sighed. "I had to try, and I'm not giving up."

He offered his hand, which I felt was a very good sign, and then left just as Anala came up the steps to the porch.

"I'm here to collect a wayward daughter!" Anala declared.

"I don't believe there are any wayward daughters here!" I replied. "Birgit is out with a friend!"

Anala laughed, we exchanged a platonic hug, then went into the house. We went to the sunroom where Avanti was with Ashley, Stephe, and their friends. I was happy to see Stephe being social, though she still had a serious attitude about boys.

"Hi, Mom!" Avanti exclaimed. "Are you coming back tonight?"

"Yes. Your dad will be home."

"Could I hang out with the girls instead? They're going to be next door at Mrs. Penfield's house."

"I don't see why not," Anala said. "I'll bring you back with me, as your dad is expecting us for dinner."

"Thanks, Mom!"

I walked them to the door, then went to find Kara.

 Birgit

"Are you going to take a picture of my butt *every* time I snap a photo?" I asked.

"I'm just photographing the most interesting thing I see!" Bob declared.

"So you're into *that*?" I giggled.

"What?!"

"Gotcha!" I teased. "I don't mind. I *know* my butt is cute! That's why I wear tight jeans!"

"And you're modest, too!"

"That's how my dad responds when I say things like that!"

"He sounds like a very wise and intelligent man!" Bob said piously.

"Usually, but like all boys, he can be really dumb at times!"

"Me?"

"You're the one who walked right into me!"

"I don't think that was dumb given you asked me to be your partner!"

"You corrected for being a boy by being a boy!" I teased.

"Just take your photo," Bob said.

I had taken a test shot of the Michigan Avenue Bridge with his DSLR, and now was taking one with film. I framed it so the Wrigley building was visible, tilted the camera slightly to create a slightly different perspective, then pressed the shutter button.

"I'm going to take a picture of the Wabash and State Street Bridges from this exact same point," I said. I can get them both in the frame from here. Then, for Dearborn, I'll take the photo so that the House of Blues is framed behind the bridge."

"You're getting the idea," he said. "Are you enjoying this?"

"Yes. I really do want to see my developed pictures from last time."

"You need to do your own developing. I have a darkroom at home for my black and white film."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. Dad built it in the apartment over the garage. It's totally my space, and I use it for homework and as a photography studio."

"Is it really that easy to develop film?"

"Black and white? Yes. I could teach you to do it in a fairly short time. Mr. Tavares will teach that later this year."

"I'm impatient!" I declared.

Bob laughed, "All girls want their way and they want it immediately! At least you're honest!"

I fake whined, "I want an Oompa Loompa and I want one NOW!"

"OK, Veruca!" Bob smirked.

"I teased my friend Tiffany about that exactly the same way when she whined about something not happening soon enough."

"Girls need patience!"

"Oh, please! As if boys are any better?"

"I've been patiently helping you learn to use a camera, something I've been doing since I was six!"

I rolled my eyes, "What-ever!"

I took the picture, and we started walking along Wacker Drive so that I could take the shot I had planned for Dearborn Avenue.

"Have you turned sixteen yet?" I asked as we walked.

"On the 10th of November."

"Do you have your Learner's Permit?"

"Yes. Mom allows me to drive from home to school in the mornings. On days when I don't have Photography club, I come home on the L. On Photography Club days, I wait for her or my dad. When is your birthday?"

"May 29th. I'll be fifteen."

"I guessed, given you're a Freshman!"

We reached the intersection, and we crossed to the west side of Dearborn so I could take the shot I wanted. We continued bridge to bridge, and I tried to find something interesting in the background of each bridge. At Lake Street I waited until two L trains were passing simultaneously for the shot, which I thought would be the best shot of all.

The bridges didn't use up the film, so I chose to take more pictures of L trains and platforms, and when I finished, we went to Maxim's and ate downstairs. When we finished Bob walked me to the Metra Electric station.

"I could take your film home and develop it for you," Bob offered. "You can have the photos on Monday morning."

"That would be cool! You have to let me know how much it costs in chemicals and paper or whatever."

"I will."

"Cool!"

Bob took my film cans and waited until my train pulled out of the station before he headed to the L so he could get home.

 Jesse

"How the heck did I just lose to a sixteen-year-old kid?" Joel, Aunt Stephanie's boyfriend, asked, getting up after I knocked him out of the tournament.

"He's Steve's kid, that's how!" Kurt declared.

"How did you get so good at this?" Mr. Alonso, Luna's dad, asked as he sat down at my table after his table was broken up.

"Playing against my dad and my siblings," I said. "And then playing in these tournaments."

"Have you seen *Rounders*," Mr. Marks, Paige's dad, asked.

"Only about a dozen times!" I exclaimed. "We have it on DVD."

"Enough talk!" Mike Knox declared. "Let's play some cards!"

"Well, Counselor," I said asked with a grin, "have you figured out who the sucker at the table is?"

Mr. Marks laughed and responded before Mike, "I decided forty minutes ago it has to be me! But I'm still here!"

"So long as nobody here is a municipal worker!" Matthew declared.

"Mike, you're the big blind, Jesse, the small blind," Karl said. "Post 'em."

We put out our blinds and Karl dealt the cards. I was big stack at the table, which meant I could selectively try to push around the small stacks, which included Karl and Pete. Mr. Alonso was doing really well, and had more chips than most at the table. Mr. Marks had about the average number of chips. There was one other table, where Terry was still playing, but I'd heard he'd taken a bad beat, and he didn't have many chips remaining.

I played smart, and made it to the final table with Matthew, Mr. Alonso, Mr. Marks, Jackson, Aaron, Clayton, and Brian. The small stacks -- Brian, Aaron, and Clayton were out fairly quickly, with Mr. Alonso getting most of their chips, putting him close to my chip count. In the end, it came down Mr. Alonso and me, and I had a series of bad hole cards, which drained enough away to make him the big stack, at which point he did a very good job of pushing me around because of the string of bad hole cards.

Finally, I had what I felt was the hand to make my move - a pair of Jacks. I pushed all in and Mr. Alonso called with a pair of Tens. I felt good until the flop came with a Ten, Nine, and Two. The Turn was a Queen, which gave me some outs, but the River was a Two, giving Mr. Alonso a full house.

"Well, that sucked," I groused.

"You still won a lot of money!" Pete observed.

"Yeah, yeah," I replied. "Good game, Mr. Alonso!"

"Thanks, Jesse."

 Birgit

When I arrived home, I didn't go into the house, but instead went to Amber's house where the kids were hanging out.

"Where were you, Birgit?" Tiffany asked.

"Taking pictures with my camera in the Loop with Bob."

"Which guy is that?" Rachel asked.

"From Photography Club," I replied. "But more importantly, Philip called and I'm meeting him for blueberry scones tomorrow morning."

"So you and Peter are done?" Tiffany asked.

"No! He's my Tuesday and Thursday afternoon playmate!"

"Trying to emulate Jesse?" Libby asked with a silly smile.

Hmm," I giggled. "«Garçons du jour»!"

"Waiters of the day?" Jasmine asked.

"You obviously haven't seen *Pulp Fiction*!" Ashley declared. "«Garçon» means 'boy'!"

"My dad would lose his mind if I watched that movie or any by the same director."

"Quentin Tarantino is amazing!" I declared. "I've seen *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown*, which he wrote and directed, and *Natural Born Killers*, which he wrote. I can't wait to see *Kill Bill*, which he's working on now!"

"I haven't even been able to see *Animal House*!" Jasmine complained. "In fact, I can't watch any movies that are rated higher than PG-13."

"Oh, please!" I exclaimed. "*Animal House* would never get an R today! Some boobs and an implied hand job? Seriously? President Clinton did more, and it was all over the news! And besides, what President Bush basically told the UN about what he's planning for Iraq is the true obscenity!"

"Ugh!" Rachel groaned. "No politics, please! We're discussing that in our Current Events class and I'm really tired of it!"

"Sorry."

"What did you take pictures of today?" Naomi asked.

"Bridges and L trains," I replied. "Bob took pictures of me taking pictures and stared at my butt the whole time!"

"It is cute!" Lilibeth declared.

"Thanks!"

 Steve

"I'm sorry we haven't had much time to talk this week," I said to Natalie when we went up to bed after midnight on Saturday.

"It's OK," she replied. "I've had a lot of reading to do this week, and my Russian lit course is brutal."

"This one is in Russian, right?" I asked.

"The honors section is. It's the same course, non-honors read in English; honors read in Russian."

We undressed and got into her bed.

"I'm really looking forward to Philosophy Club tomorrow," Natalie said, snuggling close.

"Me, too."

"How did things go on Thursday?"

"Really well, according to Jess, Al, and Doctor Washington. I demonstrated the Socratic Method by defending dropping the atomic bombs on Japan."

"Which is the opposite of your position. Did you let on?"

"No. I'll do that this Thursday. Doctor Washington asked after the session because he was somewhat surprised by the position I was taking. What can I do for you tonight?"

"Lots of foreplay, then soft and slow, and let me sleep in your arms."

"Your wish is my command!"

XXII. I Have News

September 15, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Sunday morning, after cuddling with Dad, I went up to my room to get ready for my date with Philip. I took a shower, brushed my teeth, then put on a plain cotton panty and bra set, a gray, knee-length skirt, a royal blue blouse, and ankle socks. I tied my hair back with a ribbon that matched my skirt, then went downstairs, put on my shoes, and left the house. I walked quickly along Woodlawn and turned onto Hyde Park Avenue. I saw Philip waiting, so I hurried up to him.

"Hi!" I said.

"Hi," Philip replied.

We went into Starbucks and I repeated our orders from the previous Sunday and paid for both of them. The barista at the register poured Philip's coffee and handed it to him and handed me the bag with two scones. We moved down the bar to wait for my hot chocolate with whipped cream, which was ready about two minutes later. I took my cup from the barista, and then Philip and I sat at the same table we'd sat at the previous Sunday.

I really wondered why he'd changed his mind, but I didn't want to say anything that would cause him to rethink meeting with me. I decided to keep the conversation as light as possible.

"Do you have any hobbies?" I asked. "Or things you like to do?"

"I play *Magic: The Gathering*, every Summer I go to the Bristol Renaissance Faire, and I'm a member of the SCA -- the Society for Creative Anachronism. I go to Pennsic every year, and I'm an expert in Rapier Combat."

I wanted to roll my eyes because those were such totally boy things to do, but he was, after all, a boy! But the Rapier Combat did sound interesting.

"Rapier Combat? Is that with actual swords?"

"Yes. I fight with an *épée*, the heaviest of the three modern fencing weapons. Of course, the edges are blunt, and the tip is covered with a leather guard. I also use a *main-gauche*, or parrying dagger. I use it in my left hand, which is actually what '*main-gauche*' means."

"So you're not left-handed?" I asked with a silly smile.

Philip laughed, "And I'm not a Spaniard! My family is English and Irish."

"Mine is a mix of German, English, Dutch, French, and Irish. Do you win?"

"Yes. What do you do, besides karate?"

"I just joined the photography club at school. Other than that, listen to music, hang out with friends, and that kind of stuff."

"What kind of music?"

"Mostly rock and pop from the 80s and earlier, but I like some current stuff. You?"

"Classical, plus heavy metal."

I couldn't help but laugh, "What a combo! What about books, movies, and TV?"

"Science fiction, but more 'hard' science fiction than things like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. I also really like high fantasy. And *The Princess Bride*, obviously. You?"

"Mysteries and thrillers. I've read all the Agatha Christie books, a bunch of Sherlock Holmes books, and books by John le Carré and Alistair MacLean."

"What did he write?" Philip asked.

"*Guns of the Navarone*, *Ice Station Zebra*, and *Puppet on a Chain*. I'm reading the Swedish translation of the last one, «*Marionett i kedjor*» now."

"You can read Swedish?"

"Yes," I replied. "My dad taught me to speak Swedish. He was an exchange student there and I plan to go there for my Junior year. I've been there a few times, and we visited there this Summer. I've been to Russia, too."

"That's cool. I've only ever been to England to visit relatives, and that was when I was six."

"Did you play any sports in High School?"

"No. I was in the Drama Club and the *Dungeons & Dragons* Club."

"My brother Matthew is into drama, but he goes to Oswego High."

"I thought you lived in the city?"

"I do. My family situation is complicated."

"Your parents divorced?"

"No, but don't worry about it. It's just super complicated."

"Now you have me intrigued."

I'd basically walked right into having to discuss my family situation by mentioning that Matthew attended Oswego High. Now that I'd put my foot in it inadvertently, I had to say *something*. I decided to say the minimum I felt I could get away with.

"My dad has a unique set of relationships," I said. "He has seven kids by four women, and they're all on good terms with each other."

"Wow! Do you all live together? Well, I guess not your brother."

"Two of my brothers live with their mom and her boyfriend in the suburbs. The rest of us live in Kenwood."

"The women, too?"

"Yes. As I said, it's complicated, but we all love each other and we're a very happy family."

"Your dad sounds like a cult leader!"

I giggled, "That's been said before! But he's not! You know he owns a computer software and consulting firm and is good friends with your professor, my Uncle Dave. Well, not my real uncle, like I said."

"How many are older or younger?"

"I have two older brothers, and two younger brothers and two younger sisters. We range from Junior in High School down to sixth grade. How about you?"

"A younger sister, who is a Junior in High School. What you said, last time, about your dad? You were telling the truth?"

"Absolutely. We could walk to my house and you could ask him. He might ask you a few questions, but otherwise, I get to decide who I go out with. The same is true for my siblings. My dad believes kids should have maximum freedom and be treated as if they were adults. You told me you live on campus because your parents were too strict, so you know what I'm talking about."

"I do. My parents wouldn't let my sister date until she turned sixteen, and even then, they had to meet the boy, and had to approve everywhere they were going. And if they didn't like anything about the guy, she was forbidden to see him."

"Did the same rules apply to you?"

"No."

"That's total BS!" I declared. "My dad has the same rules for all the kids, boys or girls. And the rules are pretty simple -- no drugs, no drinking without permission, do our chores, keep the family calendar updated, and let them know where we're going. I wrote on the board in the kitchen I'd be at Starbucks. And yes, Dad knows I'm meeting you again."

"And how would you see this working?"

"You mean like dating? You ask me out and we do stuff. I know I can't go to some places, but neither can you, because the drinking age is twenty-one. And there are lots of movies we can see that are PG-13 or PG, or I can get discs from

Netflix or watch them on HBO or Showtime. And there are plenty of things to do in Chicago!"

"You seem really mature, and you're really pretty, but..."

"It's OK, Phillip," I said, interrupting him. "Nobody will say anything. You said I look sixteen. Just take a chance on me! And, as I said, my mother does know! And my dad! Let me ask you this -- have you ever met a girl like me?"

"There are college girls who aren't like you!" Philip declared.

I smiled, "That's no surprise! There is nobody like me!"

Phillip laughed, "You're very sure of yourself!"

"Why shouldn't I be? I'm a young woman who is perfectly capable of taking care of myself and making good decisions. The government and society don't think so, but they are wrong!"

"Who are you?" Phillip asked.

"I'm Birgit Elizabeth Adams! Modern, liberated young woman! That's who!"

"You can stop with the sales job! Would you like to go for burgers on Friday?"

"Yes! There's a good place across from the hospital close to here. Come by my house at 6:00pm on Friday so you can see I'm telling the truth about my parents."

"What's your address?"

I gave it to him, we finished our scones and drinks, then we left Starbucks. I said 'goodbye' and headed home.

 Steve

"Good morning," I said to Antoinette when she arrived at the house at 9:00am.

"Hi!"

"Come in, and we'll go to my study."

She did, and I led her to my study, closing the door behind us. We sat side-by-side in two wingback chairs.

"Did you complete your assignment?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm here for a mindfuck and bodyfuck!"

"First two times you've said that word in our life, right?"

"Yes. Do I get to pick the order?"

"Ostensibly," I replied. "Tell me and then defend your choice."

"Body first, then mind. We both want each other, and it'll be a distraction if we wait."

"So, just get it over with?" I asked.

"I know it sounded that way, but I didn't mean it that way. What I meant is that thinking about it will prevent me from focusing on the mentoring the way I should."

"I'll fulfill your request, but I would like you to answer two questions first -- why now? why me?"

"I was close, twice," Antoinette said. "The first time, when I was fifteen, but I was too scared to go through with it. The second time, about eight months ago, I was ready, but we were interrupted and didn't have a chance to be alone again because his mom had been reassigned. Those are the only two guys I've made out with, and I guess I'd call them both boyfriends. I think I've waited long enough."

"As for you, well, first, you come highly recommended by Holly, who had nothing but good things to say about you, and about her experience with you. Second, the more I thought about it, the more I wanted someone experienced for my first time. Both the guys were also virgins, and I honestly think it makes sense for an experienced person to initiate an inexperienced person. I mean, sure, some people have religious views on that which differ, but I don't. Can I ask one question?"

"Of course."

"Was your first time with someone experienced?"

"Yes. I was fourteen, and she was twenty-three."

"Whoa!" Antoinette gasped. "Fourteen? Weren't you scared?"

"Nervous, but not scared."

"That was me the most recent time. I'm not nervous today!"

"And you've taken care of the prerequisite?"

"Yes. I had a clean STI test, and Holly said I didn't need to worry about birth control with you, because you'd had a vasectomy."

She opened her shoulder purse, extracted a folder paper, and handed it to me. Her STI test was, as stated, clean, so I handed it back and she put it away.

"We have about three hours for your initiation, and there's a room off the kitchen that used to be servants' quarters we can use."

"The room with the mirrors?" Antoinette asked with a sly smile.

"I'm not surprised Holly told you about that."

"I think it'll be cool being able to watch! And I want to be initiated exactly the same way Holly was! A complete bodyfuck before a complete mindfuck!"

I stood up, took Antoinette's hand, and led her from the study, then through the kitchen to the playroom, closing the door to the kitchen behind us and locking it. In the bedroom, I took down the suspended cloth that covered the mirror, then turned to Antoinette.

"Any last words as a virgin?" I asked with a silly smile.

Antoinette laughed, "No."

"And you're positive about wanting to do everything Holly did?"

"Yes, though I'm not sure my boobs are big enough for the one thing you guys did."

"I'd have to examine them closely to be sure," I replied with a silly smile.

Antoinette smiled and quickly pulled her t-shirt over her head, then removed her pink cotton bra. Her breasts were perfectly round, capped by bright pink nipples, but they were small, which was what I preferred, though that did interfere with her request.

"Gorgeous," I observed.

"But too small for that, right?"

"Yes."

"Holly said it was so cool when you came on her face. Could you do that?"

"Pretty much anything is possible," I replied.

"I think you have on too many clothes!" Antoinette declared.

"So do you!"

"Less than you do!" she retorted.

She unbuttoned her jeans and removed them as I began to undress. A minute later, we were both completely naked, and I admired her sexy body, complete with wispy strawberry blonde pubic hair, plump labia, and toned muscles. I held out my arms, and Antoinette stepped into them. She pressed her body against mine and we exchanged a soft French kiss.

"Now you get to be the lucky recipient of my first-ever blowjob!" Antoinette declared.

"Bed or love seat?"

"Bed, so you can watch in the mirror!"

I pulled down the duvet, got into the bed, and adjusted the pillows so I could lean against the headboard and watch either directly or in the mirror. Antoinette got into bed with me and positioned herself so her head was at my groin. I watched in the mirror. She gently grasped my semi-flaccid shaft and planted a kiss on my glans. After a second kiss, she made two circles around my glans with her tongue, then kissed the base of my shaft, and ran her tongue up to my glans, which was enough to bring me fully erect.

Antoinette took my glans into her mouth, swirled her tongue, sucked gently and proceeded to give me a slow, sensual blowjob. She appeared to be in no rush, and I certainly wasn't, enjoying the pleasure she was providing with her soft mouth. I knew she intended me to cum when she began gently stroking my shaft with her hand, bringing me closer and closer to release. She achieved our shared goal, and I groaned as I pulsed and my cum spurted into Antoinette's mouth as she sucked softly and ran her tongue around my glans.

After the last pulse, Antoinette released me and moved up next to me. I put my hand under her chin, touched my lips to hers, then pressed my tongue into her mouth to discover she hadn't swallowed. Having had numerous girls do that before, I didn't let it bother me and enthusiastically kissed her, our tongues tangling for several minutes.

"How did I do?" she asked when we broke the kiss.

"Perfect," I replied.

Antoinette smiled, "Then it's time for you to kiss me all over, lick me, and then provide the longest, gentlest, most sensual first time possible."

"Your wish is my command!"

 Stephe

"Remember," Yuriko said as we drank green tea in the kitchen. "It's not about being selfish, mean, or convincing a man to do something not in his best interest. It's about ensuring he is the best man he can possibly be."

"I thought it was about getting them to do what you wanted!" I protested.

"It is, but you should never want anything that is not in his best interests, or in your interests as a couple."

"But how is that getting what I want?!"

"Because what you actually want is for you and your man to be happy together, to be successful in life, and to enjoy the benefits of being a couple!"

"But I thought it was getting them to do what I want!"

"Nobody will be your slave, Stephe, no matter how expert you become at the art of love! You have to think about what is in both your interests, not just your own. Then what I am teaching you will help you achieve your true goals."

"My true goals?" I asked.

"You want your black belt, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"And to go to college and have a career?"

"Yes."

"And then marry Nicholas and have children with him?"

"Maybe."

Yuriko smiled, "In this case, I believe 'maybe' means yes! May I tell you another secret?"

"I suppose."

"To keep a man happy, you need to let him do the things that make him happy, but which do no harm to you or your relationship. Hiro-sama would maintain bonsai trees; Hideki-sama carves wood. Your dad plays poker, and Nicholas plays video games."

"But that's the problem! He would rather play video games than be with me!"

"Are you sure about that?" Yuriko asked. "Or did you force him to choose?"

I didn't say anything because she was right -- I had forced Nicholas to choose and he chose wrong!

"How old is Nicholas?" Yuriko asked.

"Thirteen," I replied.

"Perhaps he has not started his change of life in a way which makes him interested in love. That makes his video games more interesting, for now. That will change soon!"

"You're sure?"

Yuriko smiled, "I'm positive."

 Steve

Antoinette tasted wonderful and I very much enjoyed pleasuring her with my lips and tongue, but both she and I obviously wanted what was next, so after she had a single orgasm, I moved on top of her and lodged my glans against the slick, plump labia.

"Gentle," she whispered.

I smiled, kissed her, and carefully pushed my hips forward

"Oh!" Antoinette gasped as my glans split her labia.

Antoinette spread her knees wide and put her heels on my upper thighs, and with three gentle thrusts I buried myself inside her tight, silky tunnel. I waited, looking into Antoinette's eyes, and after about a minute, she flexed her hips. That was my signal to begin, so I lowered myself onto her body, then began thrusting slowly in and out, grinding against her mons each time I was fully embedded.

"Jesus," she breathed.

I smiled, and kissed her, our tongues tangling as our bodies moved in slow motion. Over the next ten minutes, Antoinette had a series of small orgasms, then a much larger one, her tight tunnel spasming hard around my shaft, creating even more delicious friction. That orgasm was followed by another series of small ones, reminding me of my time with Jennifer, another gorgeous strawberry blonde. After the third series of small orgasms, I allowed my own pleasure to build, and when Antoinette had her bigger orgasm, it brought me over the edge and I pushed in as deeply as I could as jets of my cum spurted into her spasming pussy.

"Wow!" she gasped when our orgasms had passed.

I kissed her once more, gently pulled out, and slid down to plunge my tongue between her labia, sucking on her clit, and teasing her to an additional orgasm, before moving up to French kiss her once more. I moved next to Antoinette, and she turned to snuggle close to me. I waited for her breathing to return to normal before I spoke.

"What next?" I asked.

"The back!" she exclaimed.

I kissed her, got the tube of K-Y from the nightstand, then encouraged Antoinette to turn onto her stomach, which she willingly did.

"You need to be completely relaxed," I said. "Just take some deep breaths."

She did as I instructed, I after appropriate lubrication, I slowly pushed into her very tight rear entrance.

"Oomph!" she gasped as my glans popped past her sphincter.

"You OK?" I asked.

"It feels strange," Antoinette gasped, "but don't stop!"

About two minutes later, after a series of short thrusts, and waiting between them for her to adapt to accommodate my length and girth.

"All the way in," I said when I had fully penetrated her.

I waited, and about a minute later, she said it was OK for me to move. I began slowly thrusting in and out of her tight, hot butt, allowing my pleasure to build immediately so as to limit any additional discomfort. Antoinette slipped her hand underneath her and began rubbing her clit. I was positive Holly had given her advice, and the advice was good, as Antoinette had an orgasm before I had my release.

"That was weird," Antoniette said when I pulled out.

"Let's clean up in the shower," I suggested.

I took Antoniette's hand and led her to the bathroom. I turned on the shower, adjusted the temperature, and we got in. I washed my groin thoroughly, then washed Antoinette's butt.

"Holly suggested a shower blowjob, but having you come on my face, because my boobs are too small.

"Your breasts are perfect!" I declared. "They're exactly the right size and shape!"

"Holly said you were weird that way!" Antoinette declared, sinking to her knees.

This blowjob was more vigorous, and I once again didn't hold back. When I twitched, Antoinette released me and used her hand to bring me off, pointing my glans at her lips, and cum splattered on her lips and chin. After the last spurt, she took me as far into her mouth as she could, sucked gently, then released me and stood up. We embraced and exchanged a deep French kiss, then Antoinette rinsed her face.

"More?" I asked.

"Now," she said with a smirk, "you're going to fuck my brains out!"

 Jesse

Viktoria called right as I left the Cathedral, and her timing was so good that I almost felt she had some way of spying on me!

"I want to see you!" she said.

"You know what the limiting factor is," I replied.

"My dad!" Viktoria grouched. "And my parents don't have any plans this month."

"I'm not sure what we can do," I replied.

"I feel like running away!"

"Don't do that!" I said quickly. "The last time a girl did that, I had to talk to the FBI!"

"What?!"

"It's a long story, but my friend Francesca ran away from home in Iowa and came to Chicago. Her mom wiggled out and called the FBI. When she got to my house, I called my Uncle Pete, who is a US Marshal, and he talked the FBI out of arresting me."

"Arresting you?! For what?!"

"Blaming me for her running away. And in Illinois, it's a crime to help someone who has run away, including giving them food and drink."

"There's no way that's true!"

"It is. According to my our family attorney, it's a misdemeanor to give ANY aid or assistance to a runaway instead of notifying the police, Sheriff, or FBI. I'm not kidding that even buying them a meal or giving them a drink can result in you being charged with a crime."

"That's just dumb!"

"That's your government at work! Anyway, I don't know what to say. You could try speaking with Father Basil, but I don't think that will help."

"There is NO WAY that I'm going to confess what we're doing!"

"All I can say is call me when you can get away," I said. "I do need to get going because I can't talk on the phone while I'm driving and I have to get to my Hangout. Talk to you soon."

"I hate my life!" Viktoria declared. "I'll call you."

We said 'goodbye', I closed my phone, then got into Dad's BMW so I could drive to Libby's house for the Hangout.

 Steve

"*Now* I'm ready for my mindfuck!" Antoinette declared breathlessly after we'd had a very athletic, mattress-pounding fuck.

"We have just enough time to eat lunch before Philosophy Club."

"Can we do this again?" she asked.

"Yes, though not long-term."

"How about through the end of the year?" Antoinette requested. "Sundays before Philosophy Club?"

"That will work," I replied. "I do have to let my wives know."

Antoinette laughed softly, "Holly told me Kara gets complete details!"

"She does!" I confirmed. "Let's shower."

We got out of bed and went to the shower where we washed each other, dried each other, then went back to the bedroom to dress. I asked Antoinette to help me change the sheets on the bed, which she did, and I gathered them, and the towels we had used, and took them to the basement to put in the washing machine. Once I had started it, I returned upstairs to find Holly in the kitchen with Antoinette. They chatted quietly while I made lunch, and once it was ready, Jackson and Suzanne joined us.

"What's the topic for today?" Jackson asked.

"No specific topic," I replied. "There will be three new people besides Antoinette, so we'll want to get to know them."

"The same way?" Antoinette asked with a silly smile.

"Considering they're guys, I'll leave that to the women!" I declared.

"Well, now that Antoinette has been properly initiated..." Holly smirked.

"I think I need several more *in depth* lessons!" Antoinette declared.

"It is a *deep* subject!" Holly declared mirthfully. "VERY deep!"

"Who are the new people?" Jackson asked, clearly wanting to change the subject.

"A friend of Ben and Elizabeth, a lawyer who works with Trish at the ACLU, and Liz's husband, Julius. There's a returnee, as well, Alicija Czerwinski, who will attend now that our kids are no longer at LaSalle."

"What was the problem with that?" Antoinette asked.

"There was a concern about how it might look to CPSD," I replied. "It's similar to how, generally speaking, staff at my company, NIKA Consulting, aren't able to participate. There's a North Side Philosophy Club which spun off from our group run by some people who work for NIKA."

"I'm sorry, but why is that a problem?"

"The concern is how it would look to other staff if people who attended Philosophy Club were promoted or received bonuses, especially given some of the topics we discuss are too risqué for HR's liking. I don't agree, but in the end, it would be the EEOC or courts who decided, and the opinion of my *Consigliere*."

"Like the *Godfather*?"

"Only much more effective than Tom Hagan, and not cut out of the family business! You'll meet her today -- Liz Crane, who is NIKA's in-house counsel. One of the new guys, Julius, is her husband, who I mentioned before."

The five of us ate our lunch, then went to the great room to await the arrival of our friends.

 Birgit

"How does this work?" Fangsu asked as we walked to Libby's house for our Hangout.

"It's an open discussion, with no rules other than being polite and listening to what other people say and respecting their opinion even if you vehemently disagree with them."

"Is there a set topic or just kind of open?"

"It depends. I didn't talk to my brother Jesse yesterday, so I'm not sure if he had a plan, but we have a few new people today, so part of the time will be getting to know everyone."

"Who besides me?"

"My friend Lilibeth, Jesse's friends Pete and DaShawn, two of Rachel's friends, LeAnne and Kimberly, and my cousin Nicholas, though he's not a real cousin, but I call his mom 'Aunt Bethany'."

"Your family is very different!"

"No kidding!" I declared. "But we all love each other, so it works. We also lost a couple of people -- Karli because she broke up with Libby by text, and Adi because her dad won't let her attend."

"Why?"

"Because she and Jesse went out, but Adi is Muslim and Jesse is Christian, and Jesse would never convert to Islam, so her dad said they couldn't see each other."

"Are you Christian?"

"No chance!" I declared. "I have no use for hokey religions where old men in robes tell everyone, especially women, what to do! Are you religious at all?"

"No. What about the rest?"

"Some people go to church, but nobody is fanatical about it. I don't think a zealot would fit in very well with our group."

In fact, I knew they wouldn't, and I was very glad Leah was still in the public school so I didn't have to listen to her bullshit. It was, if I applied Dad's philosophy, better to just ignore her and stay away from her, than confront her, as zealots could not normally be talked out of the beliefs. Of course, I knew the cure, and it had worked on Mom, Becca, and Tabitha!

We arrived at Libby's house and she let us in, and I introduced Fangsu to her and Lilibeth. The others began arriving just after us, with Jesse arriving last, because he had to drive from church. The most interesting of the new people was DaShawn, who was tall, handsome, and muscular. I had to keep myself from giggling when I thought about *Blazing Saddles* and if it was *true what they say about the way his people were...gifted!*

We all gathered in the basement, and Jesse introduced his friends, I introduced Fangsu, and Libby introduced Lilibeth.

"I think we'll skip the coming war with Iraq," Jesse said. "I think we're all tired of it, and it hasn't even started! And I'm sure it will create all kinds of controversies we'll discuss. I was thinking we should talk about peaceful protests and civil discussions, given what happened at Concordia University last week."

"What was that?" Naomi asked.

"A student protest against a visit by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu turned violent, with pro-Palestinian students clashing with pro-Israel students. A Holocaust survivor, as well as a Rabbi and his wife, were assaulted by the crowd trying to prevent attendees from entering the building. The University caved, in a sense, because they've banned any events related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for a month."

"Doesn't it make sense to have a cooling-off period?" Freddy asked. "You know, like the 'sin bin'?"

"What it telegraphs to protestors is that they can block *any* topic or *any* speaker, at least for a time, by simply creating a disturbance. It's called a 'heckler's veto', which means that someone opposed to a speaker creates a situation that causes the speaker to be silenced by the government or the owner of the property. That's what happened in Montréal."

"But doesn't the person have the same free speech rights?" Lilibeth asked.

I nodded, "They do, but freedom of speech is basically meaningless if speakers can be shouted down by those who disagree with them. I know it can be tricky, and it does depend on where it happens, but it's perfectly legitimate for the organizers of an event to exclude or remove anyone who is disruptive."

"But the government can't censor based on ideas," Lilibeth continued.

"Also true," I replied. "But they *can* restrict the time, manner, and place of speech, at least according to the courts. So the Nazis and KKK get to have their marches, but the government can limit the time and place, so long as the rules apply to everyone."

"In the same way, they can prohibit loud demonstrations outside a hospital, for example, so long as the rules aren't based on what people are saying. Personally,

I think that's wrong according to the First Amendment, but that's what the courts have said."

"Yelling 'fire' in a crowded theater?" DaShawn asked.

"Creates a tort for the owner of the theater for loss of revenue and for any patron who is injured or who was blocked from seeing the movie. It can't be a crime, at least as I read the First Amendment, which says 'Congress shall make **no** law...' and which was applied to the States by the Fourteenth Amendment."

"Hate speech?" LeAnne asked.

"Is opinion," Jesse replied. "And therefore protected by the Constitution. That was the entire point of the ACLU defending the Nazis' and KKK's right to have their marches and rallies. No matter how offensive someone's ideas or speech are, they have the right to express them and the government may not interfere."

"The only legitimate response to 'bad' speech is 'good' speech," Libby declared.

"What about good social order?" Fangsu asked.

"*Nineteen Eighty-Four*," I replied. "A 'Ministry of Truth' to tell us what to believe and what we can say? I don't *think* so!"

"What about pornography?" Kimberly asked.

"It's legal," Jesse replied. "And so is profanity."

"Hah!" I exclaimed. "Not in school!"

Jesse laughed, "You and your big mouth, Sis! Schools are permitted more leeway in limiting student speech on campus than governments normally are allowed.

But going back to Kimberly's question, George Carlin was the target of a number of censorship attempts, and a radio station actually won a case against the government over it. Carlin himself was arrested in Milwaukee for his 'Seven dirty words' routine. The First Amendment does say 'no law' and it ought to be understood to mean that."

"So you can just say anything to anyone with no consequences?" Tabitha asked.

"I didn't say that!" Jesse replied. "I said the *government* couldn't prevent you. If you go to Harlem and stand on a street corner with a sign which has 'I hate...' which I won't say the rest of, you get *exactly* what happened to John McLean in *Die Hard*! If someone at my Dad's company says something offensive to other employees, HR will intervene, and that person might be fired. That actually happened when some idiot put up a sign that said 'the only good Muslim is a dead Muslim'. Dad has Muslim employees, so he had to act."

"Was that after 9-11?" Javon inquired.

"Yes. And it was a picture of Osama bin Laden. Dad said if it had just been bin Laden with a target superimposed, or a 'wanted dead or alive' kind of thing, it would have been OK. It was the threat against all Muslims that made it so they had to fire the guy."

"So anything goes?" Tabitha asked.

"With regard to speech or ideas?" Jesse said. "Yes. But again, you have to consider the consequences of calling a black person the 'N' word or trying to hold a rally dressed in a bedsheet or wearing a swastika. The government can't stop you, but your fellow citizens may take offense."

"Are you advocating violence?" Lilibeth asked.

"No, and anyone who commits an assault would be charged with a crime, but that doesn't mean you escape the consequences of opening your mouth in the wrong way at the wrong time and the wrong place! Birgit knows all about that!"

"HEY!" I protested.

"If the shoe fits..." Jesse smirked.

 Steve

"I have news," Stephanie said when she, Joel, and her kids arrived on Sunday evening for the family dinner.

"Congratulations!" I exclaimed, making an assumption which I was sure was correct. "When?"

"Next week. We're just going to have a judge marry us. We applied for the license on Friday at lunch."

"Adams or Scheffler?" I inquired.

"We discussed it and decided I'll keep using Adams at work, though legally it'll be Scheffler-Adams. The kids, too. I have sole physical custody, so I can do that without needing Ed's approval."

"Have you heard from him at all?"

"No. And that's a good thing. Has Bethany said anything?"

"She and I still aren't on speaking terms," I replied. "It's not clear if we'll ever be."

"Damn, Big Brother. I knew you guys had a spat over her book, but that bad?"

"That bad. Are you guys taking a honeymoon?"

"Yes. We're using Samantha's condo in Monaco. I assume you'll take Patricia and David?"

They were six and eight, and in first and third grades, respectively. They went to an exclusive private school, which would mean driving them, but it wasn't out of my way in the mornings, and the school had afternoon programs so they could stay until I picked them up after work.

"Yes, of course!" I agreed. "If Albert and Birgit are amenable, they can share rooms. We'll make sure they're fed, watered, and get to school!"

"We appreciate it!"

"Who's running the show while you're gone?" I asked.

"Julia. If there's some pressing emergency where she needs advice, she'll speak to you and Joyce."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I figure two weeks of sex and sun are sufficient!" Stephanie declared.

"Sufficient for what?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Shut up, Big Brother!"

"Let's go tell everyone else the news," I replied with a silly grin.

We left my study and went to the great room where the rest of the family was assembled, and Stephanie made her announcement, and everyone congratulated them.

"David and Patricia will be staying with us for two weeks while Aunt Stephanie and Joel are on their honeymoon," I said. "Albert and Birgit, are you OK with roommates?"

"Yes!" they both declared, as I had been sure they would.

"Dinner is ready!" Yuriko announced. "Please go to the dining room! Ashley and I will bring in the food!"

We all got up and went to the dining room for our usual Sunday evening family dinner.

XXIII. You're An Odd Duck!

September 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve, I have a Detective Shanahan on the phone for you," Kimmy announced over the intercom on Monday afternoon.

I groaned inwardly, because I didn't believe in coincidences, and that made the caller Katelyn's dad.

"Put him through, please."

A few seconds later, the phone buzzed, and I picked up the handset.

"Steve Adams."

"Mr. Adams, this is Detective Joe Shanahan. Do you have a moment to speak with me?"

His tone indicated it was actually police business, not personal, which didn't allay my concerns in the least.

"I have a firm rule about not speaking to law enforcement without an attorney present," I said.

"We can do that, if you insist, but you aren't the subject of an investigation. May I tell you why I'm calling before you decide to lawyer up?"

"You may."

"I'm investigating a team of vice cops," he said.

"Julie Richman and her partners, right?" I asked.

"It appears I found the right guy," the detective said. "Still want to lawyer up?"

"I'd be more comfortable with my *Consigliere* listening," I replied.

He laughed, "Are you *inviting* an investigation, Don Adams?"

"He was on *Get Smart*," I chuckled. "It would be Don Stefano! I use the phrase because the people who get it will take in the way I mean it. Let me switch phones so I can put the call on speaker in her office."

"OK."

I put the call on hold and got up.

"Now what?" Penny asked.

"I'm not sure, but the CPD might be after the cop who tried to set me up."

I left my office and went to Liz's, quickly explained what I needed, then had Kimmy transfer the call.

"Detective Joe Shanahan, you're on speaker with Liz Crane, my attorney. She's going to listen, but she and I agreed I can answer any questions you ask. She'll only interrupt if she feels you're misleading me or not being honest."

"Understood. What can you tell me about your interactions with Officer Richman?"

I described the incident in Union Station where she and her partners had tried to entrap me in their phony prostitution sting, earning a frown from Liz for using 'entrap' and 'phony', but I was confident in my assessment of the situation. Once I'd described that, I described the other interactions over the phone, and my suspicions that they were trying to shake me down.

"Did they actually make any requests for payment?" Detective Shanahan asked.

"No," I replied. "But based on my reading of the situation, that was because I twigged to their scheme before they could put me in a position where they could extort me to prevent criminal charges."

"Going back to that, what exactly tipped you off?"

"As I said, it was obvious to me that Officer Richman was much older than she claimed. I'm a karate instructor and work with teens all the time, and have several of my own, and her eyes telegraphed she was much older. After thinking about it, I also deduced she had been undercover at Kenwood Academy, which means she very likely met one of my kids, and it just seemed too much of a coincidence that I was randomly targeted."

"Do you have any suspicions as to why they might target you?"

My primary thought was that it was either my predilection for teenage girls or my polyamorous relationships. I couldn't say anything about the first, but I could mention the second.

"At one point, in the past, CPD and the State's Attorney took an interest in my relationships with the mothers of my children."

"Mind telling me about that?"

Liz gave me a look that said 'caution' and I nodded in acknowledgement.

"I have children by four different women, and we're all on good terms, and that includes my legal wife, to whom I've been married for almost seventeen years. Three of those women live either in my house or on the same property."

"Bigamy?"

"Either that or adultery or fornication, both of which are still on the books but haven't been enforced for over two decades. That, of course, wouldn't prevent charges from being brought by the police with the attendant bad publicity. I suspect, but I don't know, that they knew about my situation and felt that gave them an 'in', which led them to target me."

"Did you have any other interaction with Officer Richman and her partners?"

"No."

"Then I think that's all I have for you. If I think of any other questions, I'll call you. Thank you."

"Your welcome."

"Have a nice day, Mr. Adams."

"You, too, Detective."

I disconnected the call by pressing the button on the speakerphone.

"You really didn't have anything that helped him," Liz observed. "You caught their scheme before they could execute it. He's looking for someone they actually extorted."

"I agree. There is one thing you should know."

"What's that?" Liz asked.

"I'm sleeping with his seventeen-year-old daughter."

 Birgit

When the dismissal bell rang after our last class, Fangsu and I walked to the room where the Photography Club met, then she continued to the one where the Math Club had their meeting.

"Hi!" Bob said when I stepped into the room.

"Hi!" I replied with a smile.

"I have your photos," he said, handing me an envelope. "They're very good."

"Thanks!" I replied. "How much do I owe you?"

"Let's discuss payment after the club meeting!"

"OK," I agreed, wondering what he might suggest.

We sat down and I looked through the bridge and L photos and was happy with them. A few minutes later, Mr. Tavares came in.

"I have your photos from last week," he said. "I'll hand them to you with an evaluation form. Please do NOT take this as anything other than constructive criticism. All of you did well, taking into account your level of experience. The cost for developing the film is \$6.00. If you don't have it, you can bring it on Wednesday. When I hand you your photos, you can hand me either film or photos from your assignment last week."

He handed out envelopes with the photos and an evaluation form stapled to the flap of the envelope. I looked it over before looking at the photos.

Adams, B.

Composition: 4/5

Technical: 3/5

Total: 7/10

Comments:

Good choice of an interesting subject.

The pictures appear random; you need to decide on a pattern and follow it.

Lighting of some of the photos was such that it's difficult to discern the subject. Use your light meter.

Overall, very good work for a first effort.

That didn't surprise me, really, because I had been completely clueless about how to take good photos, and Bob had only helped a little bit, because Mr. Tavares hadn't allowed more than that. I was much more confident with the pictures from the Loop, especially after having seen them. I looked over my pictures of the classroom and saw exactly what Mr. Tavares meant.

Mr. Tavares asked for a volunteer to share their photos and evaluation, and I was the first to raise my hand. He showed the class the photos on a special projector and discussed what was good and what could be improved. After me, he did the same for Greg.

"Your next assignment is to photograph a person. I want you to shoot two rolls of film, and every picture needs to be different in some way. I'm not looking for a model's portfolio, but that idea is not off limits. The photos or films are due a week from today. On Wednesday, we'll see a photo exhibition here on campus, and we'll discuss what we've seen."

Club ended, and Bob and I left the classroom together.

"So," I said, "how do you want me to pay for my photos?"

"Be my subject for the next assignment!"

"I can do that!" I agreed.

"Cool! Do you think you could come to my house on Saturday?"

"Sure. I have karate at 10:00am, but we're done by 11:00am. I could be in Bridgeport by 1:00pm for sure, maybe a little earlier."

"After the shoot, want to get some ice cream or something?"

"Sure!"

"OK. I have to go meet my mom! See you on Wednesday!"

"See you!"

He left, and I went to wait for Fangsu, who came out of her meeting about ten minutes later. We left the school and headed to my house to do homework.

 Steve

"Don't you think you should have mentioned that *before* the call, rather than after?"

"No, because he obviously doesn't know, and it would have colored your response."

"Of course it would!" Liz declared. "You have no idea what he knows or doesn't know!"

"Katelyn would have called me if he had somehow discovered our relationship."

"Are you *sure* about that?"

"Positive. And she was seventeen before we got together, which was before I put the new rule in place."

"It's still risky, Steve. A cop's daughter?"

"I didn't know she was a cop's daughter when we met, which was right after I went off the propranolol. The 'vibe' was in full force and when I went to Potbelly's for a salad, she waited on me and asked for my card."

"You thought Officer Richman was a setup, but you didn't think this was?"

"No, and it obviously wasn't."

"You're still seeing her?"

"Today, after work."

"No," Liz said firmly.

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"The risk is too great."

"I'll counter that it's not, and in fact, breaking it off now, because of her dad, would run the greater risk. I don't think she's the 'woman scorned' type, but why find out when there's no good reason to run that risk? And, as I said, I started this relationship before I made my new rule. And, I reiterate, she's over the age of consent."

"I still think it was poor judgment to start it and poor judgment to continue it."

"I know you do; I don't. Jess is fully aware and agrees it fits within my rules."

"And Kara?"

"I didn't mention her because you believe she lets me get away with murder. You believe that's true for Suzanne, but not to the same degree."

"I've warned you about risky behavior."

"Yes, you have. And this conforms to the parameters you set. Remember, I didn't have to tell you about it at all because she's not going to try to apply for a role at NIKA and she's over the age of consent. I *chose* to tell you. Frankly, if you're going to give me grief about outside relationships which conform to the rules to which you agreed, I won't share that information with you."

"You don't like being told 'no' any more than Birgit does!"

"I accept that statement as true, but then again, you don't like *me* telling *you* 'no' any more than Birgit likes Kara telling her 'no'."

"I still say it's unwise."

"And I accept your opinion, but choose not to follow your prescription in this case. I'll note that I have not in any way violated our agreement."

"You do remember what you pay me for, right?"

"I do. Do you remember the parameters you set?"

"I do."

"Then that's the answer. I need to finish what I was working on before the end of the day, so I'm going back to my office. I love you, Liz."

Liz smiled, "I know. You are also the most frustrating man I know!"

"Thank you," I replied with a grin.

I winked, then left her office and went back to mine.

"Aaaaaand?" Penny asked.

"Not much, because I figured out their scheme before it was sprung, so I can't really testify to anything other than a suspicion."

"Bummer. There are WAY too many corrupt cops in this town!"

"Sadly," I replied.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"I think we need to practice the kiss to make sure we got it right!" Maggie teased.

"OK," I smirked. "You practice with Mark and I'll practice with Chelsea!"

"That's not what I meant, you goofball!"

"Well, you can be sure I'm not going to practice with Mark while you practice with Chelsea!"

"Oh, gross!" Maggie exclaimed.

"I guess that's out, then, too!"

"You wouldn't, would you?"

"No, because I'm straight. But what other people do is up to them, not me. I know you have a different opinion, and I don't have a problem with your opinion, so long as you don't try to force anyone to behave the way you want them to."

"What about laws against murder and stuff?"

"Someone is being harmed, so it's OK to have laws like that. Nobody is hurt if Jesse's moms kiss! If you don't want to do it, don't do it. Just don't make laws which say nobody can do it."

"You know why I believe what I believe."

"Of course. And I still love you!"

Maggie laughed, "And if Chelsea heard you say that?"

"She knows it's platonic, just as both of us do."

"Shall we rehearse?"

"Yes."

[Chicago, Illinois]

"Your dad called me today," I said to Katelyn when I picked her up at Starbucks after work.

"Shit! Now what?"

"Nothing! He called because he's investigating a group of corrupt cops."

"That narrows it down to the entire force, minus a few!"

"It's the same cops who tried to entrap me a few years ago, but as I told you, I figured out what they were up to right away, so I didn't have any information for your dad."

"He doesn't talk about active investigations."

"Which makes sense. It's easier to just not talk to anyone except the people working the case with you. That prevents mistakes or inadvertent leaks."

"You think those cops who harassed you were dirty?"

"Very. It felt like a shakedown."

"Were you worried when he called?"

"No, because you're seventeen, so we aren't breaking any laws. Was I suspicious? Of course. But he used an 'investigator' voice, not an 'angry dad' voice, so as soon as he spoke I knew it was Internal Affairs. There wasn't a hint of anything else, and I'm pretty good at detecting things like that."

"Good! I don't want to end this until I go to college!"

"What about Prom?"

"I'm sure I'll be invited, and you said it was OK with you."

"It is so long as you follow the STI test and birth control rules. You also can't mislead the guy about your relationship status. If he wants to be exclusive, you'll have to decide between us."

"You don't strike me as the jealous type!"

"It's not. It's that I won't cheat or be a party to cheating."

"How can a guy in an open marriage cheat?"

"It's complicated," I chuckled. "But there are a few women of whom my wives would not approve, and given I know who those women are, it would be cheating to be with them because the 'open marriage' as you called it, isn't *that* open. Remember, too, there are rules about nobody from anywhere we work, and no students who have Kara or Jessica as a professor or teacher. And, of course, the age of consent for the locality where I am."

"Just out of curiosity, assuming a low age of consent, what's the youngest you would consider?"

"Fifteen," I replied. "But at this point, being almost forty, most fifteen-year-olds are going to think a guy my age is gross or creepy. Heck, I suspect most girls under eighteen and quite a view under twenty-one would feel that way."

"You don't seem that old! You look a lot younger and you're in fantastic shape."

"Thanks! But the age factor is limiting."

"I'm positive there are other girls like me."

"Yes, of course! I did say 'most' not 'all'."

"Well, this girl is very much NOT concerned with your age, only your expert ability to make her cum!"

"Then I shall endeavor to do so!"



September 17, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I need to take photos of a person for my next Photography Club project," I said as I cuddled with Dad on Tuesday morning after he, Suzanne, and I had run and showered. "I want you to be the subject."

"What kind of photos?" Dad asked.

"Just different situations or poses, but I don't want to do poses. I just want normal, everyday situations, like you eating breakfast, or reading the paper, or whatever."

"That's fine with me," I replied. "Just be careful with my wives."

"Society needs to get a grip, Dad!" I protested. "But I understand. Bob asked me to model for him for his project. I was planning to go to his house on Saturday. He has a studio and a darkroom."

"Just remember that you're under eighteen," Dad said.

I laughed, "What? No nudes?"

"You know my take on that," Dad replied, "but you could both get into very serious trouble. Even if it were tasteful and non-sexual, they'd charge you both with creating and distributing child pornography."

"Distributing?" I asked. "How?"

"In the government's thinking, if Bob takes the pictures and develops them, and hands them to you, that's both 'production' and 'distribution'. And then they'd add 'possession' as well."

"Give me a break!" I protested. "How dumb is that?"

"While philosophically I agree with you," Dad said, "don't you think most situations such as that would be exploitation?"

"Uh, huh? Like me being with an older guy is 'exploitation'!"

"I wasn't referring to you, Pumpkin, but in general. Think about some of your friends, or maybe Ashley's friends. Your group might have self-selected for attitude!"

"Might?" I giggled. "Nobody can be part of our group if they're prudish, dumb, or a Bible thumper!"

"Your mom was a Bible thumper!"

"Until you fucked some sense into her!" I giggled. "The only thing that thumps now is the headboard of the bed!"

Dad laughed, "Cute, Pumpkin."

"Can I ask a serious question?"

"Sure."

"What is 'tasteful'? I'm not saying we'll take nude pictures because of what you said before, but I'm wondering what that means."

"This won't make any sense to you I suspect, but it's the difference between *Playboy* and *Hustler*."

"I know the first one," I said. "A men's magazine that has great articles, which is why the joke is always that someone buys it for that reason, instead of the centerfold. What's the second one?"

"It's much more explicit," Dad replied. "For *Playboy*, at best you'll see the upper parts of the labia, and in the past, not much of that, because the models mostly had pubic hair. In *Hustler*, there are explicit shots with girls' legs spread, and sometimes even the labia spread."

"Wait! They can sell THAT?"

"Yes, just as they can sell pornographic movies. The government doesn't like it, but the courts have said the First Amendment protects pornography, but not obscenity, and the test is very clear. It's called the 'Miller test' and has three components. First, does the work, taken as a whole, apply to 'prurient interest', that is, it is meant to cause sexual arousal. Second, whether the work shows or describes sexual or excretory conduct in a patently offensive way. And third, if the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

"So it depends on what people would think?"

"The first two parts of the test are based on 'community standards' but the third is based on a 'reasonable person'. But, and this is vital, it applies *only* to people who are over eighteen with regard to images. Written stories, on the other hand, can include people under eighteen. Then there's the question of accessing 'indecent' material, and back in May, the Supreme Court ruled that the *Child Online Protection Act* was unconstitutional because there were less restrictive methods available which didn't interfere with adults' rights."

"Ugh!" I groused. "The stupid 'adults' versus 'little kids' argument about teenagers!"

"You aren't a typical teenager, Pumpkin, and neither are your siblings."

"And society is trying to *force* the 'little kids' definition on us! It should be the other way around!"

"Yes, it should. And I'm not arguing society is correct, just making sure you understand the ramifications of being a subversive."

"They should just let me run everything! It would be SO much better!"

"Yes, Mistress," Dad teased. "I hear and obey!"

"As if!" I giggled.

"Breakfast is ready!" Yuriko said from the door to the sunroom.

"We'll be right there," Dad said.

Three minutes later, we went to eat breakfast. After I finished, I gathered my things and then Albert, Stephie, Ashley, and I left the house to walk to school. My phone rang when we were about halfway there. I slipped it from my pocket and was surprised to see a '917' number.

"This is Birgit!" I said, after opening the phone.

"Hi! This is Marcella! I'm calling from a payphone at school. Can we talk later?"

"How?" I asked.

"I'll be at my friend's house after school. If you call, then there won't be any record my parents could find. Do you still have the number?"

"Yes. How about 3:30pm our time? I think that's 4:30pm for you."

"That's fine! Talk to you then!"

We said 'goodbye' and I snapped the phone shut and slipped it back into my pocket.

 Jesse

"Mom wants to send me to a private school," Nicolas said as we walked to Kenwood Academy.

"Did she say why?" I asked.

"No, but I can guess."

"What did Tom say?"

"That it was Mom's decision."

"What about hockey?" I asked.

"I don't know. I mean, if I don't go to Kenwood Academy, can I still play?"

"You live in the right area, so as long as your new school didn't field a team, I think you could still play. What did you say to your mom?"

"That I didn't want to change schools. I'm positive it has to do with her fight with your dad."

"That doesn't surprise me. Let me call my dad."

Nicholas nodded, so I pulled my phone from my pocket and pressed the speed-dial button for Dad.

"Hi, Jesse," Dad said. "I was just leaving for the office. What's up?"

"Nicholas' mom is talking about sending him to a private school, and I'm worried he might not be able to stay on the hockey team."

"Did he say why?"

"He's sure it's because of her fight with you."

"Did she tell him he can't be at the house or hang out with you?"

"Not that I'm aware. Once sec."

I pressed the 'mute' button so I could ask Nicholas the question.

"Did your mom say you couldn't hang out with me or come to the Compound?"

"No, but I did hear her tell Tom that your dad was a 'corrupting influence'."

I sighed, then unmuted the phone.

"Not yet," I replied. "But she said you were a 'corrupting influence'. This will totally screw over our chances of winning the city-wide tournament! No player who tried out and didn't make the team was even half as good as Nicholas is!"

"I understand," Dad replied. "If I were to call Bethany or Tom, it would only make things worse. Let me ask Aunt Kathy to call."

"What about telling Coach?"

"I'd wait until after Aunt Kathy talks to Bethany to see where things stand."

"OK, but this is going to suck!" I complained.

"Just keep your chin up for the moment," Dad said. "I'll talk to you at home this evening."

"Thanks."

We said 'goodbye' and I snapped the phone shut and shoved it into my pocket.

"What did he say?" Nicholas asked.

"That he's going to ask Aunt Kathy to call your mom and that we should just chill until they talk. He suggested not saying anything to Coach until they do."

"OK," Nicholas agreed.

 Birgit

When Fangsu and I arrived at my house after school to do our homework, I excused myself so I could call Marcella.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I have to see this dumb psychologist every week who's trying to convince me that liking girls is 'rebellion' or that I'm 'confused'! I'm not confused at all about what I want!"

"So, what do you tell her?"

"Just that I like girls and I've always liked girls. Well, I told her about how it felt when I kissed you and that I want to do it again."

"What does she say?"

"That it's a phase and I'll get over it."

"What does she say to your mom and dad?"

"I have no idea, but Mom and Dad are total control freaks now, even more than before."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault! It's Emily's! She's such a bitch! And now she's my parents' little angel who made sure I didn't fall into your evil clutches!"

"Oh, give me a break!"

"I do want to!" Marcella giggled. "Fall into your clutches, I mean!"

"If your parents are being control freaks, I'm not sure how that could happen. And you know I like boys."

"But you like girls, too, right?"

"Yes, but it's just for fun, not serious."

"I know," Marcella replied. "Have you done more?"

"Yes," I replied. "All the way with a girl and with a few guys."

"Did you like it? I mean, with the girl?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could see you so we could do it. I really want to."

"I could come to New York, but if your parents ever found out, I could be in huge trouble."

"They're going away for a long weekend next month. If you could stay with your friend, I could see you and they'd never know."

"They're leaving you alone?"

"No. I'll stay with the friend I'm with now. Her parents aren't nearly as strict, and I could be out without them saying anything."

"Let me think about it, OK?" I requested.

"OK! You can call me here any afternoon before 5:30pm my time."

"OK."

We said 'goodbye' and I closed my phone. I didn't think anything had really changed, but I would think about it before I gave Marcella my answer.

 Steve

"You aren't going to like this," Kathy said when she called on Tuesday evening, after we'd returned home from karate.

"I already don't like it," I replied. "Now what?"

"She didn't come right out and say it, but it's abundantly clear to me that she'll allow Nicholas to stay at Kenwood Academy and play hockey if you release your hold on her book."

"She's resorting to extortion?" I asked, exasperated.

"I'd say so," Kathy said, her voice indicating commiseration.

"Then I have no choice but to invoke the nuclear option."

"Why do I not like the sound of that?"

"Because I don't like it, either. I'm going to ask Samantha to join me in putting a hold on funding for the Easton Center."

"You wouldn't!" Kathy gasped. "That's her life's work!"

"And she's fucking with Jesse and his hockey team to get back at me. You know my theory of how to respond to threats to my kids."

"No quarter given and none expected."

"Exactly. I'm going to invoke the Lundgren Foundation rule that allows any two members of the Board of Directors to put a ninety-day hold on funding pending a complete audit of the organization, including financials, policies, and mission."

"You'll hurt people who need her services," Kathy observed.

"I doubt it. She has some reserves, and she'll keep going, but she'll understand that I'm serious and she'll yield rather than give up her life's work."

"That seems extreme."

"It is. But I'm positive she'll yield after throwing a temper tantrum."

"I don't like it, but I understand why you feel it's necessary."

"She escalated, and I need to put an end to this once and for all."

"I understand. I'm sure she'll call me when she hears."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, then dialed Samantha's number.

"Hi, Steve! What's up?"

"Jesse told me this morning that Nicholas reported that Bethany was thinking of moving him to a private school because of my 'corrupting influence'. That would take Nicholas off the hockey team. I spoke with Kathy and she said Bethany strongly implied that she'd relent if I release the hold on her updating her book."

"Uh oh," Samantha replied. "I know you well enough that you're running up the black flag."

"Kathy had the same response -- no quarter given and none expected. I'm invoking Lundgren Foundation Rule 18b."

"Sorry, which one is that?"

"Any two Board members may put a ninety-day hold on funding of any organization pending a complete audit of the organization, its books, its policies, its procedures, and its mission. And per Rule 18c, as the requesting Board member, I'll oversee the audit."

"And you want me to be the second."

"I would."

"Done. Involving the kids in your dispute is going too far, and you're right to choose the nuclear option. What do you expect her to do?"

"Throw a temper tantrum and then yield. She won't give up the Easton Center. I'm going to call Ben Jackson now and let him know."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, then dialed Ben Jackson's number.

"Hi, Steve. What can I do for you?"

"I'm invoking Rule 18b with regard to the Easton Center. I have concerns about Doctor Krajick."

"It takes two Board members to invoke that rule, which I'm sure you know."

"I do. Samantha is the second. Per Rule 18c, I intend to oversee the audit and will propose an auditor and a private investigator."

"What's your concern?" Ben asked.

"She's behaving erratically," I replied.

"OK. I'll confirm with Samantha, though I'm sure you're properly representing her agreement. Once I do that, I'll notify Doctor Krajick immediately by phone, then follow up by letter."

Which would mean that the wire transfer she was expecting on October 1st would not occur.

"Thanks. I'll have names for you tomorrow afternoon."

"OK. I'll speak to you then."

"Thanks, Ben."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up. My next two calls were to Katya and Bo. Katya provided me with the name of an Illinois private investigator and Bo agreed to perform the audit. That accomplished, I rejoined my wives in the 'Indian' room for the rest of a relaxing evening.



September 18, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

The phone call I expected came at 3:30pm on Wednesday.

"Steve, I have Robert Rhodes on the phone for you," Kimmy said over the intercom.

"Put him through, please," I requested.

The phone buzzed, and I picked up the handset.

"Steve Adams."

"Mr. Adams, this is Robert Rhodes."

"I know why you're calling, and I'll refer you to my attorney, Deborah Rice of van Hoek, Mills, and Rice in Cincinnati. She's licensed in both Ohio and Illinois and is admitted to both the 5th and 7th Circuits. If you need to speak to counsel for the Lundgren Foundation, you can get that information from Ben Jackson at the Foundation. I have nothing to say beyond that."

"May I have Ms. Rice's number, please?" he requested.

I gave it to him, then disconnected the call and called Samantha.

"The game is afoot," I said when she came on the line.

"Her attorney called you?"

"Yes, and I referred him to Deborah in Cincinnati. I also let Ben know that Bo will conduct the financial audit, and one of Katya's team, a guy who goes by 'Hall', will do everything else. Well, assuming Bethany doesn't capitulate before Monday when they'll begin work."

"What if she refuses to cooperate?"

"Then she loses the grant and would have to reapply. But the guidelines say that any organization that refuses to comply with Rule 18 in any way is subject to a full audit if they reapply. So she has no recourse unless she can find alternate funding. And that's not going to happen because if she balks, then on Monday I leak to the Press about the audit and investigation."

"Jesus, Steve! You're ruthless. How do you fix that when she capitulates?"

"The audit finds that they the Easton Center is squeaky clean and a feature-length article appears in the *Tribune*."

"And you can make that happen?"

"Yes. But it's not going to come to that. She has no legal recourse against me or the Foundation and no way out. She'll capitulate by Friday."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. She's completely boxed in. I think pulling Nicholas from Kenwood Academy was a bluff, or, if she is planning on doing that, she'll send him to Morgan Park Academy, because their kids play on the Kenwood Academy team."

"You've thought through all the angles, obviously."

"I think so. Bethany has had an easy way out from the start. All she has to do is write a new book and release it. But the book isn't the thing. She's after me, personally, and my family."

"Why?"

"Her goal is to kill off the subversive cell because she's decided that teenagers are children, and I'm the 'lone voice crying in the wilderness' who is successfully arguing that they are adults, and gaining converts to my cause. I'm not going to yield, ever."

"And you shouldn't! Does she have *any* cards to play?"

"Not really."

That wasn't quite true, as Bethany *could* try to use DCFS or law enforcement, but her problem there would be complete and total denial on the part of any young woman she tried to turn against me. It might be ugly, and it might take every bit of legal firepower I could muster, but in the end, nothing would come of any investigation. And it was the knowledge that in the end nothing would come of it that would deter her.

About an hour later, Deborah called.

"He was fishing for what it would take for you to back off," Deborah said. "He realizes there is literally nothing they can do if the Foundation cuts off Bethany's funding at the end of the month. He could try for an injunction, but there is zero chance he'd get one, and he knows it."

"I know what she wants," I said. "And it's not what she's telling her attorney. And it goes back to everything that happened between Bethany and me starting in eighth grade. Ultimately, she wants me to be the ideal man she envisioned who she would marry, have kids with, have a house with a picket fence, a dog, a cat, and a parakeet. And that ideal man is monogamous and completely faithful. She tried, any number of times, to come to terms with who I am, and each time, things blew up between us. This is just the latest round."

"You didn't tell me that before."

"You're right, because I didn't want it to influence with your discussion with Mr. Rhodes. What did he offer?"

"A compromise. You allow her to revise the book, to update it with regard to new information on STIs, to add a chapter dedicated to LGB concerns, and to make minor revisions to the chapters on sexual activity by teens."

"I'd need editorial control over those last revisions," I replied. "And I'd need that in writing."

"That is on the table, though obviously she was hoping you wouldn't insist."

"The problem is, based on the conversations we've had over the past two years, I don't trust her. It is, in the end, similar to how I broke her trust when we were seventeen."

"Do you want me to draw up an agreement?"

"Yes, please. It needs to include a clause that Nicholas remains on the hockey team. If she wants to take him out of Kenwood Academy, I'll pay Nicholas' tuition at Morgan Park Academy, which is the private school which contributes six team members."

"You know there is no possible penalty clause for breaking the proposed agreement that would stand up in court, right? I mean beyond you withholding consent to publish a revised version of the book."

"I have to trust her," I replied. "Despite what I just said before about not trusting her."

"You are a very odd duck, Mr. Adams!"

I chuckled, "That's my son! I'm a penguin!"

Deborah and I both laughed for a good minute before we continued the call.

XXIV. A Bluff?

September 19, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I wanted to let you know that I have a date tomorrow night," I said to Peter when he came over after school on Thursday.

"OK," he said, sounding a bit disappointed.

"Let's do our homework, and when Fangsu goes home, we can go upstairs."

"What about the fact you have a date tomorrow?" he asked.

"So long as it's not cheating, what's the problem? I told you about it, and I'm not trying to hide it from you. Or from him."

"It's just...never mind. Let's do our homework."

I had an essay to write, so I went to my room to get my new iBook 14" and opened Microsoft Word, then joined Peter and Fangsu in my dad's study, which we were allowed to use for homework if he wasn't at home. Ashley, Chadrima, Stephe, and Stephe's friend, Brooke, who also went to the Lab School, were doing their homework in the sunroom, and Albert was doing his in his room, as he normally did.

I finished my essay, then reviewed the part of a cell for a biology quiz we'd have on Friday. When all of us finished, Fangsu headed home and Peter and I went up to my room where we took off our clothes and go into bed.

"Are you upset about me going on a date?" I asked.

"It's just that I like you a lot, Birgit," Peter said. "A lot."

"And I like you, too, but I don't want to be tied down with anyone. Well," I giggled, "unless you want to tie me up!"

"That just seems strange," Peter replied.

"I think it could be fun! Imagine me tied up and you being able to do anything you wanted!"

"Right! Because you won't let me do anything I want when you're not tied up!"

I laughed, "Good point! That includes being with both Julie and me!"

"And you're going to, uhm, do stuff with her?"

"Yes!" I giggled. "I told you that you can watch! And have both of us!"

"I'm, er, a bit nervous about that."

"Why?" I asked. "It'll be fun!"

"She's a virgin, right?"

"Yes."

"And she wants to do it with me?"

"And with me! It'll be fun! I promise! But we're talking too much now! How about we sixty-nine, then fuck?"

"Yes!"



September 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"You know I don't think this is wise, right?" Liz asked late on Friday morning.

"I do, but it has to happen, and it has to be private. And if you're worried about recording, you know that Illinois is a two-party consent state."

"And as you so creatively interpret things, when you call your credit card company and they say 'This call may be recorded for training and security purposes', you interpret *that* as giving YOU permission to make a recording!"

I laughed, "Obviously, since they say the call 'may be recorded' and 'may' means granting permission, as in 'Mother may I?!'"

"Or 'might', as in 'this call *might* be recorded'."

"You say 'po-tay-to', I say 'po-tah-to'! But in the end, my understanding is valid and conforms to a dictionary definition; it's neither slang nor idiom! And I can have even more fun with auto-antonyms!

Think of the word 'sanction', which means both 'penalize' and 'approve'! Or 'oversight', which means both 'miss' and 'watch closely'! Or 'overlook' which means to 'miss seeing' or 'have a great view'. Or 'bolt' which means 'to secure in

place' or 'dash away suddenly'. Or 'custom' which means 'special order' or 'common practice'. Or 'handicap' which means both 'advantage' and 'disadvantage'. Or 'dust' meaning 'to remove particles' or 'sprinkle particles on crops'. Or 'cleave', which means both to split apart and to cling together, as in 'a man shall cleave to his wife'."

"I get it! I get it!" Liz said, laughing and shaking her head. "And you think lawyers play with words?!"

"And now you understand why 'statutory construction' is a bullshit method of understanding the law, and why determining legislative intent is vital. That's part of my rationale for insisting that the courts should use *The Federalist Papers* to determine what the Constitution means. Anyway, returning from the rabbit trail, there is little risk because I hold *all* the cards."

"Out of curiosity, would you *really* have shut down Bethany's practice?"

"Does it matter?" I asked with a smile. "It was enough that Bethany believed that I would."

"A bluff?" Liz asked.

"As I say at the Hold 'Em table, you have to pay to see my cards!"

"And because you've cultivated the idea that there is no such thing as 'too far' to defend your kids, wives, and people you love, the bluff works."

"Assuming it was actually a bluff," I replied. "I hope to never, ever have to show my hand. The goal is for the other person to muck their cards because the risks are too great."

"Julius said he'd never want to play poker with you in a cash game, or sit across from you at a negotiating table."

"A wise man!"

"Just be smart, Steve."

"I will."

I left the office, walked to my car, which was parked behind the building in spot 1, got in, and headed for Medici in Hyde Park. Given how bad parking was, I parked in the dojo lot and walked the rest of the way, arriving eight minutes early.

"Hi," Bethany said when she walked into the restaurant about two minutes later.

"Hi," I replied.

I let the hostess know we were ready to be seated, and she led us to a booth which would afford a good amount of privacy. A waitress came to take our drink orders and once she had them, Bethany and I quickly perused the menus. When the waitress returned with our drinks, she took our orders, then went to put them in with the kitchen.

"You really are an asshole," Bethany said fiercely but quietly.

"And as the person who has known me the longest, except for Stephanie, and who has been my close friend consistently longer than anyone else, you should know how I would respond to a perceived threat against Jesse."

"There are a number of reasons I might decide to move Nicholas to a private school."

"Yes, there are. But it wasn't gangs or drugs or quality of education that motivated you, it was an attempt to extort something from me. Once you involved my family, you left me no choice."

"What do you like to say? That we always have choices?"

"No choice consistent with who I am and my commitment to protect my kids at any cost."

"So you'd destroy my life's work for a stupid trophy?"

"You know it's not about that, it's the fact that you chose to involve Jesse in the spat we're having. You, of all people, knew *exactly* what my response would be before you did it. You knew full well I'd response decisively and in a way that ensured your scheme wasn't successful. What annoys the hell out of me is that had you come to me with what our attorneys agreed to, you'd have saved heartache AND thousands of dollars. And remember, YOU brought lawyers into this, not me.

"But all of that is a sideshow for you trying to impose your views on me and shape me into who you wanted me to be. That started at fourteen, and each time you become frustrated that I won't adopt some specific view which you find important, you wreck our relationship. This time it started in Michigan when we were all there on vacation and you got on my case about Jesse. I did everything I could to deter you from ruining our relationship, but once again, you did the same damned thing.

"This time, though, it's worse, because you've decided that not only do I have to change, but so do my kids, the cousins, and anyone who has adopted my philosophy with regard to teenagers. The sick part is that we're following the

basic outline of *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*, which **you** wrote! I sent you to Sweden to see that your repudiation of your own philosophy is flat-out wrong.

"You did see that, and then dismissed it as 'cultural differences'. The thing is, that attitude used to be prevalent here, through the fifties and sixties, though not with regard to sexual activity, which I chalk up to American Puritanism. But other than that, teens were considered young adults, NOT children. And now we're seeing eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds called 'teens', which is technically correct, but with the implication they are *children*, not adults.

"Society is wrong, Bethany, and you *know* it. You've capitulated to the mob, and I suspect it's because you're concerned about how you look to the other members of your guild. That's the worst possible kind of groupthink I can imagine! Not just excluding other opinions, but harming people in the process. I get that it's difficult to be the lone voice of sanity in an increasingly insane world, because that is how I often feel.

"The bottom line is, *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* and *Why Me?* are two of the best books on sexuality and relationships ever written, and I simply can't stand by while you repudiate the sex-positive message they express, even in the context of the violence of rape. I pointed out the logical conclusion you have to reach about our relationship due to your position."

"Are you finished?"

"I've said my piece," I replied.

"You won. Why do you have to continue to be an asshole?"

"You're wrong," I replied. "I haven't won a thing, rather I've lost a friend. Worse, I've lost my Sweetheart."

"That's such bullshit, and you know it!" Bethany growled.

"I know no such thing. You were always special. Always. We were this close," I held my thumb and forefinger about a millimeter apart, "from marrying. You chose to blow it all up by dropping a bomb while we were lying in bed at your house after you recovered from your accident."

"You wanted your freedom, not a traditional marriage!"

"I wanted to have Jesse, have kids with Elyse, and have kids with Kara. All three of them would have honored any committed, monogamous relationship into which I entered. Jessica would have been nothing more than a random medical student I met in Indianapolis, and I'd likely have never seen her again. Sure, she might still have ended up in Chicago because of Al, but she'd be just another ER doc who worked for Al, who wouldn't have been a close friend the way he now is.

"Am I perfect? By no means. But I was honest with you every step of the way. Did I screw up in a major way with Becky? Absolutely. But I also confessed and accepted my penance from the Triumvirate. You knew *exactly* who I was at every step, and then you played the victim when I turned out to be exactly as advertised. I want to be your friend, Bethany. I love you with all my heart. The question is, do you want to be *my* friend?"

"You still want validation, don't you?"

"Oh, for the love of Loki! Do you even listen to ANYTHING that I say? I explained, quite clearly, that there are new rules in place, and I'm following them. But I simply will not repudiate the idea that teenagers are able to consent, and that for those who want it, an older, experienced partner can be a very good thing. That said, teenage girls generally don't want a guy my age, so the opportunities, if I wanted them, are fewer and further between.

"But just in case somehow I was hallucinating and never said it -- the rule is no girls under the age of consent, along with the rules about girls who work at NIKA, or work with, or are studying under, Jessica or Kara, and about girls in committed relationships. Can there be exceptions? Possibly, but any exceptions have to be discussed with my wives in advance, and *permission* is necessary, as opposed to me managing my sex life.

"I'm going to be blunt, and point out that with four exceptions, all my partners since I turned thirty-one have been over the age of consent. That's over eight years, Bethany. And those exceptions were special cases. The 'problem' you are trying to solve basically no longer exists, partly because of me, but mostly because girls under eighteen think I'm too old."

That wasn't universally true, as I knew Tiffany and Amber had designs on having an 'expert deflowering', but as I'd said to Bethany, there were only four exceptions -- Angelina, who was a misjudgment, Rachel Rizzi, Nicole Heath, and Kristin Will. Natalie Heath had been fifteen, but we had been in Russia, and the age of consent there was fifteen. The US government would quibble, but I hadn't taken her to Russia, and what we'd done had been legal in Russia. All the other girls had been over the age of consent where they lived.

Granted, that hadn't been true when I was in my twenties, but contrary to Bethany's thinking, I wasn't as interested in teenage girls as I once had been. Yes, there were exceptions like Kristin, but most girls between fifteen and seventeen weren't mature enough for me, with the possible exception of some of the cousins, but even there, many of them saw me as 'too old'.

"So it's lack of opportunity, not lack of desire."

"I'll counter that by saying that I know of three girls under the age of consent who would go to bed with me today if I permitted it. And you know as well as I

do that the age of consent is arbitrary, and is too high in many US states. I'd argue all, but I have, in the past, suggested I could live with sixteen, though I'd prefer fifteen. And that has nothing to do with my desire, but with my views on teens. One, I'll remind you, that matches *exactly* what you wrote in *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*."

"Wanting to have sex doesn't mean you're ready to have sex!"

"And wanting to have kids doesn't mean you're ready to have kids. The bottom line here is that you can think whatever you want about me, but I am not going to allow you to infantilize the cousins. Period. The most conservative dads, Pete, Dave, and Karl, do not agree with you. They don't agree with me, either, but they're much closer to my position than to yours. Dave freaked out a bit because Peter and Birgit are hanging out quite a bit, and have gone out a few times. But he didn't forbid Peter from seeing her, despite my daughter's precocious behavior."

"Your relationship with her..."

"That did not, and will not, happen. She accepted my 'no' and moved on, exactly as I had hoped she would. She's having her own struggles with relationships and sexuality, and is finding her own way, which is what we all have to do. Cloistering kids is a foolish idea, no matter what the goal. Look, I know I'm not going to convince you to adopt my views lock, stock, and barrel. What I want is for you to acknowledge that the cousins are sufficiently mature to make their own decisions in that regard and to leave them alone unless they ask for advice."

"And not update my book to reflect current views."

"Because current views are pure, unadulterated bullshit, Bethany! Current sex education is a farce. Access to birth control is far too tightly controlled. STIs are rampant because some morons felt the best approach to teenage sexuality was to

hide information from them! Well, I have news for you! You put two adolescents in the same room and with zero information, they will figure out 'Tab A in Slot B'. As I've said many times, the dumbest jock and airhead cheerleader can figure out how to fuck with no outside help!

"So, update your book to address LGB concerns forthrightly, update the information on STIs, add information about new birth control methods, and if you feel it absolutely necessary, add counter-point information to the discussion of teenage sexuality. But do not weaken your sex-positive arguments to make the counter-point the take-away. I'd prefer you didn't, but a discussion of, for example, how to deal with power disparity, is fine. What's not fine is making that a barrier to ANYONE having sex."

"You and that stupid 'slippery slope' argument."

"So stupid that you can't refute what I've said. I asked you, point blank, about very specific situations with regard to Jesse and Birgit, and you refused to answer because you couldn't escape your own logical conclusions. And worse, you couldn't defend your position against the logical conclusion about OUR relationship when we were fifteen.

"You see, 'slippery slope' arguments are not *always* logical fallacies any more than 'whataboutism' is always a logical fallacy. That term was coined expressly to deflect accurate claims of hypocrisy on the part of the US by the Soviet Union. Yes, in *some* instances, a 'slippery slope' argument can be wrong, but not when it's simply following your beliefs or actions to their logical conclusion.

"The bottom line here is that I'm looking out for the best interest of my kids and the cousins. You think that's a smokescreen for my own behavior. It's not. Period. And you've let that incorrect belief color your entire view, which made you susceptible to the lunacy that is passing for adolescent psychology these days.

"It's bound up in moral panic, prudishness, and fear. Add in a dose of control-freakery, and you end up with an entire generation of maladjusted teens who are never going to have healthy views on sex and relationships. I am not pushing for some kind of return to *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*, but society has become completely unmoored from the «kami» of the Founders, and things are going to get far worse."

"Leave it to you to make it a political rant!"

"It's not. Any foundation is better than *no* foundation. We had Civics class, which taught us our rights and responsibilities. That no longer happens because Loki forbid we should teach people they're responsible for their own actions! We reward failure with 'participation trophies' out of a misplaced notion that it builds self-esteem, but all it is doing is creating a generation of entitled whiners who think that they deserve a prize when they lose!

"All of this, every bit of it, flows from turning teenagers into infants and refusing to allow them to grow up and experience life with all its warts. We're doing more harm in the guise of 'protection' and 'safety' than any of the theoretical dangers ever could do! Of the tens of thousands of kidnappings in the US, almost all of them are like Francesca -- a custodial parent violating a court order. You know full well that rapes by total strangers are a tiny percentage of all rapes, and that child abuse is almost always done by a parent, close relative, or friend. You *know* those things, and wrote about them, but now you ignore ALL the evidence. Why? For the accolades from your peers? Are those accolades worth tossing society into Gehenna?"

"This is how you restore our friendship?" Bethany asked.

"We certainly can't go on the way we were before. You weren't even willing to agree to disagree! When we were in Iron Mountain you flat-out rejected ANY compromise in your views, even after I showed you how extreme they are, AND

you tried to force me to change my mind by accusing ME of all manner of harmful behavior and of condoning harmful behavior. You know I believe in 'live and let live'. You don't. If you can't at least get to THAT point, I'm wasting my time, effort, and breath.

"And I'll take it one step further -- I yielded on my hard line about your book. But that's apparently not good enough for you. The only thing you'll accept is unconditional surrender. You want me to repudiate the values I've developed over the past thirty years through emotional, mental, and physical struggles. I've made quite a few missteps and learned from them. But you can't accept that. You want capitulation. That is simply not going to happen.

"And the thing is, all of our mutual friends see the same thing I do. All of them. I know Kathy has spoken to you several times. And you know she's no weak-willed sycophant and more than Julia, Cindi, Jackie, or others. Nor is Anala, with whom I've rekindled my friendship. And on and on. Name ONE person who agrees with you more than they agree with me?"

"They know you'd shun them if they didn't!"

"Oh, bullshit, Bethany! Pure, unadulterated bullshit! Elizabeth and Ben? Henry, Trish, and Gabby? Liz? If you think they're all under some kind of spell cast by a Svengali, then I truly am wasting my breath! Hell, my kids don't agree with me! The only one who even comes close to full agreement is Birgit, and she and I have our differences. The same is true for my wives, who speak their minds and have their own opinions.

"I think at this point, the only thing to do is have our lunch and part ways until you can at least acknowledge that you are the outlier amongst our group of friends. Our perception of reality is so divorced from that of the other person that we can't even have a conversation. I want you to be my friend and I want to be your friend. But the ball is in your court."

"Release my book."

"I have, just not unconditionally. I'm not going to capitulate to you, Bethany. Not on something this important. If that's your bottom line, then there's nothing more to say."

The waitress brought our lunches, and we ate in silence. I had hoped being direct would help Bethany see my point of view, even if she didn't agree with it, and that she could at least agree to disagree. All evidence suggested she was unwilling to do so. And that meant there truly was no way forward.

Nothing was said for the rest of the meal, but I did need to say one more thing before we parted.

"Promise to keep Nicholas at Kenwood Academy or transfer him to Morgan Park, and I'll call Ben and rescind my audit request," I said. "There is no compromise on that because I won't allow you to interfere with the kids' relationships or the hockey team."

"Nicholas is my son!" Bethany protested. "It's up to me."

"And if you force him off the team, he'll hate you for the rest of his life. He'll leave home the second he turns eighteen and you'll never see him again. Trust me, I know how this movie ends, because I was a co-star along with my sister. I've also seen it with a number of others who are part of our group. It's your call, obviously, but actions have consequences. Doing anything to interfere with Jesse and Nicholas or Stephie and Nicholas will have consequences. It's up to you. Do I have your word?"

"Asshole."

"That may well be an accurate epithet, but it doesn't answer the question."

"You have my word, asshole."

"Thank you."

I paid the bill, and we left the restaurant, parting without so much as a 'goodbye' on her part. I contemplated going back to the office, but decided against it, and when I reached my car, I drove home.

 Birgit

"Hi, Dad!" I exclaimed when I walked into the house after school. "What are you doing here?"

"I had lunch with Bethany and decided to take the afternoon off. I can only take so much of Penny!"

"She wants ALL of you!" I giggled.

"She makes that abundantly clear! Ready for your date?"

"Yes, though it's not for a few hours."

"I meant mentally ready! I know you need to put on your war paint!"

"Oh, please! I barely use any makeup at all!"

"You do have your mom's natural beauty!"

I SO wanted to roll my eyes, but didn't because I knew Dad was trying to push my buttons about Mom. And reacting would only encourage him, as it had Jesse when I was younger.

"I am gorgeous! I'm going to do homework, then take a shower, and dress."

"Have fun on your date, Pumpkin, and be smart."

"I will!" I declared.

I knew what he was getting at, and it was similar to the situation with Matthew and Chelsea, now that she was eighteen. That meant I couldn't even hold hands with Philip in public. I went to the sunroom to do my Algebra homework, which would take about an hour, and planned to do my reading over the weekend, though I'd already read *Brave New World*, so that would be quick. I had lots of reading to do for my Ancient History class, and some for biology, but I could do that on Sunday afternoon, because there wasn't a Hangout this week.

Doing the odd numbered Algebra problems in the chapter took just over an hour, and then I went upstairs to get ready for my date. I started as I usually did, stripping off all my clothes and standing in front of the full-length mirror. I decided my pubic hair needed a trim, and I also had to shave my legs and my underarms because I hadn't done that all week.

I got the clippers I'd bought, put the correct length guide on them and carefully trimmed my pubic hair, then turned on the shower. Once the water was hot, I got in and lathered shaving gel on my legs and under my arms, and carefully used a new razor to remove the hair. Once my legs were smooth as silk, I used my rose-scented soap and apple-blossom scented shampoo to ensure my body and my hair were clean, rinsed off, then used a large fluffy towel to dry myself. I checked the mirror again.

"You are too sexy for words, Birgit Adams!" I declared.

I brushed my teeth, applied deodorant and body spray, then went to my wardrobe and chose a pink bra and panty set. I put them on, then went to my walk-in closet and decided I'd wear a knee-length white skirt and a red blouse. I put them on, then put on a pair of footies before brushing my hair. I decided against tying it back, and instead draped it over my shoulders, which made me look older. Last, I applied a hint of lipstick which was just slightly pinker than my lips.

"You look good enough to eat!" I told my image in the mirror.

I chose a purse that looked nice with my outfit, transferred my things to it from my school purse, and then went downstairs to wait for Philip to arrive.

 Steve

"How did things go with Bethany?" Kara asked when she arrived home.

"It started with her calling me an asshole and things didn't improve from there."

"I thought this was supposed to be a reconciliation meeting!"

"Me, too, but she had no real interest in reconciliation. She wants me to release her book to her with no restrictions. And she still won't acknowledge that I've changed. She thinks I'm regularly bedding underage girls, which you know is not true."

"I can count on one hand the girls who you've been with in the last ten years who are underage!"

"I know. And she still insists that Sweden is, in effect, an aberration. But that would make all of Europe an aberration, rather than the US."

"So now what?"

"I made it clear that if she lifts a finger to interfere with Nicholas and Jesse being friends and Nicholas playing on the hockey team, the audit would be reinstated. There is no way I'm going to allow her to interfere with the cousins and turn them into infants. Can you imagine Birgit's reaction?"

"I'd prefer not to," Kara replied.

"My thoughts exactly."

The doorbell rang, and I heard Birgit scamper to answer it. A minute later, she came to the door of the 'Indian' room with a tall, good-looking, slightly out of shape college student. Kara and I both stood up to greet him.

"Dad, Mom, this is Philip. Philip, my Mom and Dad.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Adams," Philip said.

"Hi, Philip!" Kara replied.

"Hi," I said, extending my hand. "Call me Steve, please."

We shook hands.

"Dad, we're going to get burgers, then we'll probably come back here to watch a movie because here's nothing at the theater."

"OK," I said. "Have fun!"

"Thanks, Dad!" Birgit exclaimed.

"Nice to meet you both," Philip said.

Birgit took his hand and led him away.

"Does he know what he's gotten himself into?" Kara asked with a smirk.

"Not yet!" I chuckled

 Birgit

"I told you they'd be cool about it," I said as Philip and I walked south on Woodlawn Avenue.

"You look a lot like your mom."

"Gee, thanks," I said sarcastically.

"I meant that as a compliment," Philip said hastily. "Honest!"

I giggled, "I know. I was being sarcastic! We do that a lot at our house. And we all have goofy senses of humor."

"Not my parents. My dad is totally straitlaced. I don't know if he's ever told a joke in his life, and rarely cracks a smile."

"What does your dad do?"

"He's a CPA. What about your parents? Well, I know what your dad does."

"Mom is a chemistry professor at UofC. My other mom is a trauma surgeon."

"You call them both 'Mom'?" Philip asked.

"Yes. Does your mom work?"

"No."

"You know," I said, "I should have asked, what day is your birthday?"

"Sunday."

"What are you doing?"

"My parents and sister are taking me to dinner at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse."

"Dad really likes that restaurant."

"It's awesome. I'd invite you, but if my dad found out you were fourteen, he'd lose his mind."

"What time are they taking you out?"

"They're picking me up at IIT at 5:00pm. Why?"

"Let's have lunch at my house. I'll bake a cake!"

"Really?"

"Really! My parents will be cool with it."

"Don't you have to ask?"

"No. I know there's nothing on the calendar, and there are plenty of places in the house we can be where we won't bother anyone. We can play pool, watch a movie, play games, use the sauna, or listen to music."

"Sauna?"

"Yes, we have one in the basement."

"I've never been in one!"

I was SO tempted to blow his mind, but I remembered Dad warning me to be careful. A naked sauna was probably a bad idea, but nothing prevented me from wearing my string bikini!

"Bring your bathing suit on Sunday and we can use it."

"OK. How is your photography club going?"

"It's fun. Can I ask what you would usually do on a Friday?"

"Go to a party or play *Magic: The Gathering* or *Dungeons & Dragons*."

"Fraternity parties?"

"Yes."

"Are you in one?"

"No. I live in the dorms, like I said, but there are open parties."

"We have great parties at our house! The next one is Halloween, and you could come. The kids have their own party, but teens are allowed to be at the main party."

"Which day is the party?" Philip asked.

"November 1st, because Halloween is on a Thursday. You can show up any time after 7:00pm."

"I should be able to."

We arrived at the diner, and were seated in a booth, and because we both knew what we wanted, the waitress took our orders right away.

"After we eat, we should get ice cream," I said. "Then go back to my house and watch a DVD from my dad's collection."

"That sounds good," Philip agreed.

 Jesse

I was just about to shut down my iBook when instant messenger flashed that I had a new message from Akiko.

安希子: Hi! How are you?

MightyDuck: Great! You?

安希子: Good, but better if I could see you! I very much enjoyed being with you!

MightyDuck: Me, too! Is it Saturday there?

安希子: Yes! just after 7:00am! It's Friday evening there, right?

MightyDuck: Yes. I'm just about to go meet my friends for Chinese food.

安希子: You like the taste of Japanese!

MightyDuck: Food and a certain girl!

安希子: Me? 😊

MightyDuck: You are the only Japanese girl I've tasted!

安希子: Dad and Mom said it would be OK for you to visit.

MightyDuck: I need to look at the hockey camp schedule and talk to my dad.

安希子: I hope you will visit!

MightyDuck: I want to! How is school?

安希子: It's good! I'm happy to see my friends again, but I miss my American friends. How is your school?

MightyDuck: Great!

安希子: And ice hockey?

MightyDuck: We won our first game easily against one of the best teams.

安希子: Excellent! You play tomorrow, right?

MightyDuck: Yes. We're ready!

安希子: Good! I will let you go. I just wanted to let you know that my parents said you could visit.

MightyDuck: And share your futon? 😊

安希子: I discussed it with Mom and she will not object. She knows we were together.

MightyDuck: I'm more worried about your dad!

安希子: Like all Japanese men, he does what my mom tells him!

MightyDuck: LOL! That is not how I understand it!

安希子: As Yuriko says, we let them think they are in control!

MightyDuck: Uh-huh! 😬

安希子: Silly! I will IM you next weekend!

MightyDuck: OK!

安希子: Have fun tonight. I'm about to leave for school.

MightyDuck: That's right, you go on Saturday, too.

安希子: Yes! Bye!

MightyDuck: Bye! 😊

I shut down my computer, then went downstairs to put on my shoes. I said 'goodbye' to my moms who were just about to leave for a dinner with some friends, and went outside to wait for Freddy, who arrived about a minute later. We headed to the Chinese restaurant which was close to Libby's house, where we met a dozen of our friends.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

On Friday evening, Mom drove me to the Metra train so I could spend the weekend at the townhouse with Chelsea.

"Can I ask you a question about girls?"

"Of course," Mom replied. "Is there a problem with Chelsea?"

"No," I replied. "It's about Maggie. She's acting strangely."

"How so?"

"It's like she's flirting and if I didn't know better, that she wants to have sex with me."

"You do realize that going to church and reading the Bible have exactly zero effect on hormones, right?"

"Jesse!" I chuckled.

Mom laughed, "I wasn't thinking about him..."

"Aunt Kara?"

"That's who I was thinking of. I have to ask, but are you having second thoughts about Chelsea?"

"No way!" I said firmly. "Chelsea and I are a couple, and we're going to marry, have kids, and grow old together. Someday, we'll even be as old as you!"

"Not if you make comments like that, Mister!" Mom replied.

I laughed, "You're so easy to wind up on that topic!"

"Just watch it, Buster!" Mom said playfully, but then became more serious. "What did you want to know?"

"Why would Maggie flirt with me and hint that she wants to go to bed with me? She knows I love Chelsea and would never, ever cheat."

"You and Maggie get along great, right?"

"Sure. We have since I met her in third grade."

"And you're attracted to her, right?"

"She's cute!"

"Don't you think she could think the same about you?"

"Sure. But it doesn't make sense, because she knows I'm with Chelsea. Not to mention she's always said she's waiting for her wedding night."

"So was your Aunt Kara until she met your dad! But there's a possibility you haven't considered."

"A marriage like Dad's?" I asked with a silly grin.

Mom laughed hard, "Somehow I do not see Chelsea agreeing to share you!"

"Me, either! If I even suggested it, you'd never find my body! What possibility?"

"That you are the absolute safest person on the planet for Maggie to express herself to. She can flirt with you and tease you, and she knows nothing would happen."

"But why?"

"Call it testing the waters or practice. Maybe she wants to change, or she's curious about finding a different path through life, and Matt Adams is the perfect person with whom to experiment because beyond those stage kisses, nothing will ever happen."

"I hadn't considered that idea," I said. "But what, and this is not going to happen, I offered to take Maggie up on her flirting and her suggestion? Then what?"

"Then she'd have to decide if that was what she truly wanted. And that would be on her, so long as you were honest with her."

"I guess I'm just concerned about it, because I don't want to hurt her, but I also have no intention of ever doing anything that would upset Chelsea."

Mom laughed softly, "Good luck with that!"

"You know what I meant! Nothing with another girl that would upset Chelsea. I'm sure I'll do something because it appears impossible to please girls all the time in every way!"

"And men?"

"Birgit's theory is that a blowjob covers all ills!"

"That would be her theory, but she's wrong."

"I'm not going to tell her!" I declared.

"Self-preservation is strong with my eldest son!"

"The only person who can tell Birgit she's wrong is Dad. And even he treads lightly!"

"Just as you do with Chelsea."

"Because I love her."

"Obviously!"

Mom pulled up next to the steps to the Route 59 Metra platform, I grabbed my bag, and when the car stopped, I hopped out, said 'goodbye', then walked quickly up the stairs to the platform, as I saw the train approaching. We'd cut it close, but I'd made it. When the train stopped, I boarded and took a seat in the upper deck. I had about an hour before the train arrived at Union Station, so I pulled out my iPod to listen to music, and my American Government textbook, put on my headphones, chose my 'Study' playlist, then opened the book to the chapter on the Executive Branch and started to read.

XXV. Model Attitude

September 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

After Philip and I got ice cream, we walked back to the house and decided to watch *The Princess Bride*.

"Let's take it up to my room," I said. "That way, we won't bother anyone else."

"I know I sound like a broken record, but your parents are OK with that?"

I wanted to say my parents would be OK if I told them we were going upstairs to fuck, but I didn't think Philip was ready to hear me say something like that, as nervous as he was about me being only fourteen.

"Yes," I replied. "Dad trusts me to make good decisions."

We went to the kitchen to get drinks, then went up to my room. I put the DVD in the player and turned on the TV, which was smaller than the one in the great room, but big enough to enjoy the movie.

"You have your own TV, DVD player, and computer?" Philip asked.

"Yes," I said, picking up the remote and pressing 'PLAY'.

I sat down on the loveseat to watch the movie, though I was careful not to sit too close to Philip. I was concerned that I'd scare him away if I were my usual self.

What really bugged me was that the older guys I'd been interested in had all felt I was too young.

That had even been true for Mikhail, but thankfully, Katt had convinced him that I was mature enough, no matter what the government thought. I was going to enjoy living in Sweden for a year, and when I came home, I'd be seventeen and no longer 'underage' in Illinois. And when I turned eighteen, then I was sure nobody would think I was too young! But that was almost four years away, and WAY too long to wait.

We both enjoyed the movie, even though we'd both seen it a bunch of times. I was tempted a few times to scoot closer to Philip, but decided against doing that, and when the movie ended, he said he wanted to head back to his dorm. I walked him to the front door, and we went out onto the porch.

"See you Sunday!" I said, and kissed him on his cheek.

Philip smiled, "See you Sunday."

He left, and I watched as he walked south on Woodlawn until he turned east to head towards the L, then went inside to the great room where Jesse and his usual Friday evening gang were hanging out.



September 21, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Mom said I can stay at Kenwood Academy," Nicholas said when we met in the locker room on Saturday morning.

"She and Dad had lunch yesterday," I said. "It must have gone well."

"I don't think so. I heard her tell Tom your dad is an a-hole."

"Well, that's between them, so long as she's not messing with hockey. Are you ready for the game?"

"Yes!"

We changed into our gear, Coach gave a pep talk and reviewed our game plan, and then we hit the ice for our warmups. I saw a number of cheerleaders in the stands, as well as about half the softball team, plus Libby, Natalie, Brooke, and my dad. Of course, Mom One and Mom Two were there, and all the other parents and some siblings. Lane Tech had at least as many supporters as we did, and that meant it was going to be a very loud game. Their supporters tended to be rowdy as well, which meant the Yellow Jackets, who enforced the rules for spectators, would be busy.

We completed our warm up and pre-game rituals, and when the referee dropped the puck, we won the face-off and had our first shot on goal just fourteen seconds into the game. The puck didn't go in, but it boded well, and we pressed the attack until Freddy drew a penalty against Lane Tech for tripping. One minute into the powerplay, Tom fired the puck over the Lane Tech goalie's shoulder to give us a 1-0 lead and return Lane Tech to even strength.

The game stayed that way until Lane Tech took a second penalty late in the first period, when one of the Lane Tech defensemen hooked Nicholas when he was on a breakaway, giving us a rare penalty shot. The Lane Tech supporters were angry and made a lot of noise, and I heard both profanity and disparaging words about the referee. I saw the Yellow Jackets move into one of the rows to confront someone while Nicholas skated back to me.

"Where is he weak?" Nicholas asked.

"High, stick side. Stay away from his glove side, and either deke and put it in the five hole or roof it stick side. I'd deke *then* roof it."

"Got it!" Nicholas declared.

Nicholas skated to center ice and after the ref placed the puck and blew his whistle, Nicholas took the puck and skated in on the Lane Tech goalie. He deked twice, the Lane Tech goalie went down into a butterfly and Nicholas easily put the puck over his blocker and into the net, giving us a 2-0 lead. That only enraged the Lane Tech fans further, and two of the Yellow Jackets escorted a pair of Lane Tech supporters from the stands. I didn't like the rules, but they were clear to everyone. Unfortunately, I felt that was only going to make things worse.

When the first period ended 2-0, the Lane Tech fans booed loudly and several of the Lane Tech players muttered insults under their breath so that the referee didn't hear them. I hoped their coach got them calmed down in the locker room, because otherwise they might retaliate, despite the 'no checking' rules.

"Great job so far, Men!" Coach Nelson declared. "Stay disciplined, and don't take any penalties, and we'll bring this one home! Get hydrated, change your undershirts if necessary, and rest your legs!"

Freddy put on some music on the small boombox he always brought and we chilled while we drank ice cold bottles of water. When the horn sounded, the team trooped out of the locker room and went to the bench, with the first O and D lines taking the ice with me. A minute later, the referee dropped the puck to start the second period.

The Lane Tech coach had his players fired up, and they won the face-off, then skated the puck into our zone. I turned away three shots before we managed to

clear the puck to center ice, but Lane Tech stole a pass and set up for another attack. They got off one clean shot, but I caught the puck in my glove and held it for a face-off which would be to my left. Nicholas came out with his line with Freddy and Mike as the defensemen.

Kelly, the center on Nicholas' line, won the puck back to Mike, who passed to Freddy, who hit a streaking Nicholas with a perfect pass into the neutral zone. One of the Lane Tech defensemen was back and in good position, and forced Nicholas wide, and just as he was about to pass to Kelly, the defenseman who was about a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier than Nicholas, ran Nicholas into the boards.

Nicholas went down and the referee's arm went up, and he pointed at the Lane Tech defenseman and signaled a five-minute major.

 Steve

Nicholas didn't get up, and Kelly frantically waved for the coach.

"Fuck!" I swore under my breath and pulled out my mobile phone and dialed 9-1-1.

"9-1-1! What is your emergency?"

"I'm at Johnny's Ice House and we have an injured hockey player."

"What happened?"

"He was checked into the boards by a much bigger player and is down on the ice. He appears to be unconscious."

"That's the ice rink on Madison?"

"Yes. The player is a thirteen-year-old male."

"Stay on the line. I'll dispatch the paramedics. Someone should go outside to meet them."

"I'll do that; it's not my son who's injured."

I put my finger over the mic of the phone and asked Natalie to go to Coach Nelson and let him know I'd called for the paramedics, and that they shouldn't move Nicholas. She jumped up, following after Tom and Bethany, who had gotten up right away. Once she was on her way, Suzanne and I went outside to wait for the CFD and CPD, who I was sure would both respond.

"I hope he's OK," Suzanne said as we went out the doors.

"Me, too," I replied, keeping the phone to my ear with my finger over the mic.

"That was a cheap shot," Suzanne observed.

"It was. I suspect we'll see a game misconduct and a suspension because this is a 'no check' league."

"The paramedics should be with you in three minutes. "

"Thank you."

I heard sirens two minutes later, and a CFD ambulance pulled up, followed by two CPD squad cars.

"The paramedics are here," I said to the 9-1-1 operator.

"OK, Sir. Good luck."

"Thanks."

The paramedics grabbed their gear and a gurney and I led them into the arena and to the door to the ice used by the Zamboni. Nicholas was still down on the ice with Tom and Coach Nelson next to him, with Bethany at Tom's side. The rest of the players on the benches, so once the paramedics and one of the CPD officers were on the ice, I went over to speak to Jesse..

"Anything?" I asked.

"He's conscious," Jesse replied. "His hands and feet are tingling and his neck hurts, so they didn't move him."

"Good. Game misconduct?"

"Yes. Five minute major and a ten minute misconduct, which is an automatic ejection. That's at least a three-game suspension."

It took about fifteen minutes for the paramedics to get Nicholas into a neck collar, onto a backboard, and then onto the stretcher. They rolled him off, followed by Tom and Bethany, and Coach came back to the bench.

"Where are they taking him?" I asked. "Cook County?"

"Yes. His mom wanted them to take him to UofC, but they have to take him to the closest trauma center."

"Those are the rules," I said. "Will the game continue?"

"Yes. Thanks for calling 9-1-1."

"It was obvious as soon as Nicholas was hit that we'd need them."

Suzanne and I went back to our seats and let Josie and Jennifer know how Nicholas was doing.

"They ejected the kid who hit him," Josie said.

"Jesse told me. He also said he expects a three-game suspension, at least."

"Deserved," I agreed.

"The ref isn't going to give Lane Tech any grace," Natalie said. "They'll take at least four more penalties, and that'll only rile them up even more."

"I suspect the Yellow Jackets will eject more fans before we're done," I observed.

The guys ended up winning the game 5-1, with Lane Tech getting a goal on Jesse in with about four minutes to go when they stole a pass and had a two-on-one rush against him.

"We got a little careless at the end," Jesse said when he came out of the locker room. "Where did they take Nicholas?"

"Cook County," I replied.

"I'm going there," Jesse said. "I'll take Libby and Lilibeth with me, along with Freddy. That means I need a licensed driver over eighteen in the passenger seat."

"I'll go with you," Natalie offered.

"Suzanne and I will be right behind you," I added.

 Jesse

"They won't tell me anything," I said to Dad. "And I think Bethany and Tom are in with Nicholas."

"HIPAA doesn't allow it," Dad said. "Let me call Jess and see if she can get a status for us."

"How does that work?" I asked.

Dad smiled, "Professional courtesy."

He pulled out his mobile phone and called Aunt Jess, but she didn't answer, so he left a message then dialed Doctor Al. He answered and he and Dad spoke for a minute, then Dad waited for a couple of minutes, then thanked Doctor Al.

"Mild concussion and spasms in his neck muscles," Dad said. "He'll be released in the morning after observation in neuro. Nobody will be able to see him except Tom and Bethany."

"When can he play again?" I asked.

"There's no way that Al can answer that question. That's up to the doctors here and to Tom and Bethany."

"Shit," I replied.

"You're free to stay if you want," Dad said. "But I'm going to head home so I can teach my afternoon karate class."

"I think we'll go home, too," I said. "If they won't let us in to see him, it doesn't make sense to sit here."

"OK."

Dad walked towards the doors and Coach stopped him, and I was positive Dad filled him in on Nicholas' condition. I walked over to talk to Natalie, Libby, Lilibeth, and Freddy.

"He has a mild concussion and muscle spasms in his neck," I said.

"Son of a bitch!" Freddy swore. "He's out for at least a week, if not longer."

"That's what concerns me, too," I said. "We can manage one game short a winger, because next game is against Providence St. Mel, and they're a low ranked team. But we play Brother Rice in two weeks, and they're one of the top three teams with us and St. Rita. Coach is going to have to call one of the guys who was cut and see if he can get them to play for a few weeks."

"That's going to suck," Freddy said, shaking his head. "When we play these assholes again..."

"We're going to play clean and beat them," I said. "You know the league will be looking for even a hint of retaliation."

"So we just take it?"

"No," I replied. "We shove it right up their asses by beating them without resorting to breaking the rules. Let's go. I'll make sure I get an update from Tom."

We left the hospital, and I dropped everyone at their houses, then headed home.

 Birgit

"This is my neighbor Meghan," Bob said when I arrived at his house. "She's going to help with lights. Did you bring changes of clothes?"

"Yes," I replied. "Hi, Meghan."

"Hi, Birgit," she replied. "Nice to meet you!"

"We'll do one roll here in the studio," Bob said. "Then one roll outside along Halstead."

"OK," I replied. "What should I wear?"

"For the inside shots, your skirt and blouse," Bob said. "For the outside shots, your shorts and polo shirt. You can change behind that screen."

I laughed and didn't move. I took off my jeans and polo shirt and put on the skirt and blouse, noting a wide-eyed Meghan. I wasn't modest, and I was wearing a simple white cotton bra and panty set that covered more than my string bikini!.

"I see you already have the model attitude!" Bob said with a smirk.

"What grade are you in, Meghan?" I asked.

"Tenth, like Bob. You're in ninth, right?"

"Yes. How long have you guys known each other?"

"Since we were born," Meghan said. "I live next door. My dad's a fireman and my mom is a police officer. How about you?"

"My dad runs a computer software and consulting firm and my mom is Assistant Chair of the UofC Chemistry Department."

"And you know my parents are professors at UofC," Bob added.

"What kind of shots are you going to take?" I asked.

"The inside ones will be casual, with you reading a book, watching TV, and so on. The outside ones will be window shopping, walking along the street, and sitting on a park bench. I'll take some shots with my DSLR first to determine the settings and get an idea of what the shots will look like. What are you doing for yours?"

"Pictures of my dad around the house and at the dojo where we train. So, where do you want me?" I asked.

"Let's start with the couch. There are some magazines there. Try lying on your stomach, your knees bent, and the magazine on the couch in front of you."

I got into position and looked at Bob.

"Look at the magazine," he instructed.

He took some shots with his digital camera, had Meghan move some lights around, then took one more. He was obviously satisfied, so he took a shot with his film camera, then had me change to sitting with my legs curled up, reading a book. He had me make several more poses, then change into my shorts and polo, which I did without going behind the screen. Once I had changed, we left his studio and headed to Halsted Street.

"Just walk casually down the street, the way you would, and stop to look in windows," Bob directed. I'll just take the candid shots as you walk."

We left his studio, walked down the stairs to the driveway, then walked a few blocks to Halsted Street. I simply walked, looked in windows, and otherwise tried to be casual. About five minutes along, my mobile phone rang. I slipped it from my pocket and saw it was Jesse calling.

"Hey! What's up?" I said, after flipping the phone open to take the call.

"Nicholas was hurt in today's game," Jesse said. "Some jackass on Lane Tech boarded him."

"How is he?"

"He has a mild concussion and muscle spasms in his neck. He's at Cook County and they're keeping him overnight."

"Did you get to see him?"

"No. Just Tom and Bethany were allowed in."

"Will Nicholas be able to play?"

"Probably not this week, and I don't know about after that. We need to wait to see when the doctors will clear him."

"That sucks. Did you guys at least win?"

"5-1," Jesse said. "I gave up a goal on a two-on-one after a stolen pass."

"What happened to the other kid? The one who boarded Nicholas?"

"Ejected. He'll be suspended by the league, and might even be banned."

"Does Stephie know?"

"I have no clue if Dad told her or not. I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks. I need to get back to the photo shoot!"

"Cheesecake?" Jesse teased.

"Not yet!" I giggled. "Later!"

We said 'goodbye', I closed my phone, and slipped it back into my pocket.

"Sorry," I said to Bob. "That was my brother letting me know one of his teammates was hurt in their game this morning."

"What sport?" Meghan asked.

"Hockey. My brother is the goalie. Our friend Nicholas is a forward, and he was hurt when a guy from the other team illegally checked him into the boards."

"Is he OK?"

"He has to stay in the hospital overnight because he has a mild concussion."

"Ready to continue?"

"Yes!"

Bob finished shooting his roll of film, and we decided to have lunch at a diner not far from his house. When we finished, he suggested I join him to develop the photos, so he could teach me how to do it, and I quickly agreed. We went back to

his studio, over the garage, and into the darkroom. It was a tight fit for two, so Meghan decided to go home rather than sit and wait for us.

"This first time, I'm just going to do it and you watch, but I'll explain the steps as I do them, OK?"

"Sure!" I agreed.

He showed me the equipment, which included an enlarger and filters, photographic paper, along with chemicals he called developer, stop bath, and fixer. He turned off the main light and turned on a low-intensity red light. He placed the film canister in a lightproof bag and wound the film onto the developer reel by feel, then put it into the developer tank.

"First, I'm going to do some test exposures," he said. "I pretty much know what I want, but I'll show you the whole process."

"OK."

It was totally cool to watch as he went from the strip of film to finished prints, which, after he washed them in running water, he hung on fishing line strung across the darkroom.

"They need to dry about two hours," Bob said. "Want to get milkshakes?"

"You don't have to ask twice!" I declared.

We left his studio and started walking toward an ice cream shop he knew.

"Is Meghan your girlfriend?" I asked.

"No, just a friend," Bob replied. "We hang out and do stuff together. Her friend Mariana hangs out with us sometimes, and I do stuff with her, too. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No. just a couple of guys I hang out with sometimes. Do you have guy friends?"

"Most guys around here are into sports. I'm not, so I don't hang out with them too often. There's one guy at the Lab School, Darius, I hang out with. We play video games together sometimes. I'm mostly a loner, I guess. I suspect you have lots of friends."

"I do. Why a loner?"

"Mostly because photography is my main hobby and nobody else I know outside of Photography Club is into it. Meghan and Mariana are cool with it, but mostly because Meghan and I have been friends for fifteen years, and Mariana likes to hang out with us. Do you do anything besides karate? Well, and now photography?"

"Hang out with my friends, listen to music, watch movies, go to museums, and read. Once a year I go to Vermont for two weeks and help out with my friend Katy's bed-and-breakfast."

"What do you do?"

"Whatever she tells me! Everything from baking pies and making ice cream to helping guests with requests. Last time, we refurnished some rooms, which means new drapes, bed linen, and so on. Sometimes I watch her son Davey, though he's old enough now he doesn't need a babysitter."

"What kind of shake do you usually get?"

"It depends," I replied. "I like chocolate or strawberry best, but sometimes I'll get vanilla."

Especially if I wanted to tease a boy! Bob hadn't given any signs he was interested in *that*, but maybe he was just playing it cool, because I had the impression from the way he said it that 'doing stuff' with Meghan meant fooling around, though it might just be kissing.

"What do you like?" I asked.

"Chocolate, for sure, but I also like Blizzards at Dairy Queen with mixed in Reese's or Oreos. Of course, DQ ice cream is not as good as Oberweis or the shop here in Bridgeport."

"We make our own ice cream at home, though it's a special recipe so my dad can eat it."

"Special recipe?"

"It uses a sweetener called Stevia instead of sugar."

"Is your dad diabetic?"

"No. He has some weird hormone imbalance, and if he eats too many carbohydrates or too much refined sugar, it messes up his hormone regulation. It's not life threatening, just weird."

"Do you or your brother have it?"

"No. And I have four brothers and two sisters."

"Whoa! Seven kids?"

"It's a blended family," I replied, using our usual subterfuge.

"Do all your siblings live with you?"

"No," I replied. "It's only my sisters and one brother who live in our house."

If he came to the house, I'd have to explain more, but I didn't know him well enough yet to just spill the entire story. I didn't want dad to have to keep reminding me to be careful, so I was being extra cautious, without telling any lies.

"Do you like having siblings?" Bob asked.

"Usually, but sometimes they can be annoying. But so can moms!"

"My mom really isn't around enough to be annoying. Same for my dad. They built the studio and darkroom to try to make up for me being alone most of the time. I figure it's a good trade, because they don't bother me when I'm in my studio and I have a lot of freedom."

"How old were you when your parents let you stay home alone?"

"Twelve. Before then I went to an afterschool program at UofC."

"When will you get your driving license?"

"Who knows? It's taking forever because I don't get much driving in except back and forth to UofC."

"My dad took my brother driving on weekends and in the evening to get him enough time."

We reached the ice cream shop, and I ordered a strawberry shake and Bob ordered a chocolate shake. It was so nice out, we decided to walk while we drank our shakes.

"Did you have plans for tonight?" I asked.

"Not really. Why?"

"Dinner and a movie; well, if anything is playing, we both want to see and can get in. I'm not sure."

"How about *Swimfan*? It's PG-13 if you're allowed to see it."

I laughed, "Dad's rule is we're allowed to watch any movie that he brings into the house, and anything on HBO, Showtime, or Cinemax. I have no filters on my computer, and nobody checks what sites I've visited. So, yes, I'm allowed to see it, and no, I don't have to call home to check. I wrote on the calendar that I'd be home by curfew."

"Your parents don't care?" Bob asked.

"They care a lot! They just trust me to make good decisions and to be responsible. I get to run my own life as I see fit, so long as I follow simple family rules."

"What rules?"

"Do my chores, maintain at least a B average, update the family calendar with what I'm doing, and respect everyone's privacy and belongings."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"So you can literally do anything you want?"

"I *can*, but did you miss the part about Dad expecting me to make good decisions and be responsible?"

Bob laughed, "No, but all you need is a good lawyer to stay out of trouble!"

"You have NO idea," I giggled.

"What do you mean?"

"Dad has about a dozen lawyers! When I had to talk to the FBI, I had three!"

"The FBI?"

"The idiot government thought my Muslim friend's dad, who was a math professor, was a terrorist."

"Professor Kahn, right?"

"Yes! They lived across the street from us and I was friends with his daughter, Fatimah. Mr. Kahn was unfortunate to be in Boston on September 11th, and the FBI decided he was a suspect, so they sent a goon squad to his house to interrogate his wife and kids, and then us, because we were friends. Dad's business sells software to lawyers, so he knows a lot of them, and he's friends with a lot of them. He had three come to the house to protect the Kahns and help us."

"Dad called them fascists when he heard about it."

"FBI, KGB, Gestapo, NKVD, Stassi, SAVAK, the Revolutionary Guards, it doesn't matter if they're on the right or left, goons are goons."

"You put the FBI in the same group?"

"You said your dad called them fascist!" I countered.

Bob laughed, "So I did! Are we seeing the movie?"

"Yes. And we should go to Maxim's lower level for dinner. They have a huge menu and good prices."

"Sounds good to me! Let's check the showtimes and make a plan. I have to check with my parents."

"Great!"

 Steve

"Thanks for being here a bit early," I said to Anala when she arrived to pick up Avanti.

"You should thank Avanti for giving up some of her time with you!"

"I did," I replied.

"What did you want to discuss?"

"Bethany," I replied.

I explained what had happened during the past week, and as she often did, Anala listened without asking any questions.

"If I asked you to look at it from her side, what would you say?" Anala asked with a sly smile.

"I wouldn't ever take her position!" I declared. "I don't think it's defensible. For many things, I can see both sides of the argument and even defend things with which I don't agree."

"But wouldn't you agree that it's possible for there to be a situation where power disparity barred consent?"

"Yes, of course, such as a professor and a student or a boss and an employee or a doctor and medical student. But for Bethany, *any* power disparity, *any* age disparity, and *any* experience disparity means consent cannot be given under any circumstances. Logically, only two people born on the exact same date who had zero experience of any kind could ever consent to sex."

"You don't think that's a bit extreme?"

"I do!" I declared with a grin.

"I meant YOUR analysis!" Anala said, shaking her head.

"No. That is *exactly* what she's said. I asked specific questions about Jesse and hypothetical situations and *all* of them were abusive in her mind. I pushed her on applying her logic to her relationship with me and she didn't deny that by her rules, she was unable to consent, I should have known that, and therefore her insistence that I make love with her was invalid and I raped her. Honestly, she can't deny that in her system, I abused Kara and Jessica, and pretty much every other girl I've been with.

"The root of her complaints is her belief that I'm still bedding teenagers right and left. That is simply not true, but she won't accept that it's not true. As I pointed out to her, in the past ten years, there have only been four girls under the age of consent where we were at the time we were together. Part of it, I'm sure, is that the cousins are entering their teens, and she's convinced all of them are going to ask, but that's simply not true."

"Out of curiosity..." Anala asked with a smile.

"Most of the girls think I'm too old. Not all of them, but for most of the girls who are under seventeen, 'old' for them would be thirty. I'll be forty in April. And no, I don't feel old at all, but I do know the age disparity creates a situation where many, if not most, girls will feel it's 'creepy'. And if Avanti has been as forthright with you as I believe she has, you know I've set a firm limit of fifteen, and even that is only in limited and special circumstances."

"She did tell me, and joined the ever-growing group of young women who find you frustrating!"

"I am nothing if not consistent in that regard!"

"No kidding!" Anala declared. "Going back to Bethany, if what you say is true, I'm not sure what you could do."

"Me, either. I offered a concession which would allow her to create a new edition of the book, so long as she didn't change the sex-positive message. She rejected that idea."

"Do you think you overreacted by threatening her funding?"

"No, because she escalated. And I did offer a concession that she could send Nicholas to Morgan Park Academy, which supplies players to the team. Of course, it might be moot now."

"Why?"

"Nicholas was injured this morning. He has a mild concussion, but no other injuries. They're keeping him overnight for observation."

"What happened?"

"A cheap shot by a player on the other team because Nicholas had scored. The other player was ejected and Jesse thinks he'll have at least a three-game suspension."

"Did you talk to her after Nicholas was injured?"

"No. She and Tom were with Nicholas and nobody else could see him. I chose not to wait at the hospital."

"I don't have any specific advice for you other than to reconsider if you're overreacting."

"I'll think about it," I replied.

"Good. How are things going otherwise?"

"It's only taken seventeen years, but I've finally managed to be a full-time software engineer. The kids are doing great, my relationships are stable, NIKA is doing well, and other than a Bush being in the White House, things are good overall."

Anala laughed, "You and your loathing of that family are legendary!"

"Do you disagree?"

"No!"

 Jesse

My phone rang while I was on my way to Libby's house, and I didn't recognize the number.

"Go for Jesse!" I exclaimed when I answered.

"It's Nicholas."

"How are you?"

"Good, now that Mom finally left! I mean, I have a headache, but otherwise I'm OK."

"And the spasms?"

"Gone. The neurologist said it was probably a result of a compression of my vertebrae, but the MRI was negative for any injury beyond the concussion. I can go home in the morning."

"When can you play?"

"I have to follow up with a neurologist in a week, and if I don't have any symptoms, I'll be allowed to practice. If that goes OK, then I'll be able to play against British International Academy."

"So you'll only miss the game against Brother Rice?"

"Hopefully."

"I'm glad you're OK."

"Me, too! Of course Mom is being a mom!"

I laughed, "That's what moms do! She's not going to make you stop playing, is she?"

"No. She's not that freaked out."

"Good!"

"What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm heading to Libby's. A bunch of us are ordering pizza and we're going to watch a movie on her dad's projection TV."

"OK. I'll see you at school on Monday. I can't practice this week."

"OK. See you Monday. Call me if you need anything!"

"Cool!"

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, happy that Nicholas would only miss one game.

 Stephie

"Tell somebody who cares!" I growled at Jesse when he told me Nicholas had been hurt in his hockey game.

"Come on, Sis," Jesse replied. "Even if you're still upset with him, which you shouldn't be, you should care that he was hurt!"

"What-ever!"

"Sis, you need to chill or your life is going to totally suck. I can't make you chill, but I think you'll discover that it's not worth being worked up about Nicholas. If you let him bug you, then he's in total control! Think me with Birgit until a year ago."

I almost laughed because Jesse could wind up my older sister simply by walking into a room where she was and not even saying anything. It was like some kind of evil superpower! Which was exactly what he was saying about Nicholas.

"Maybe," I replied.

"No 'maybes' about it!" Jesse replied. "You know how I could upset her just by being in the same room. Once she figured out that put me in control, she stopped reacting. And at that point, it was no longer fun to mess with her that way. You're allowing Nicholas to upset you when you don't even see him! Seriously, Sis, take a chill pill! I'm going to Libby's. Later!"

He left and I considered what he said, and though maybe he had a good point.

 Birgit

"What did you think of the movie?" Bob asked.

"I liked it! I was positive almost from the beginning that Madison was a stalker and a psycho! Go figure a guy in a relationship is tempted by available pussy and it goes badly when he cheats! Who woulda thunk it?"

Bob laughed, "That's pretty much a trope, right? *Fatal Attraction*, but about teens."

"And kind of over the top, too," I replied. "I mean, it was like Madison had superpowers and could do anything she needed whenever she needed. Of course, being a woman IS a superpower, so maybe not so unrealistic!"

"Uh-huh."

"We need to hurry," I said. "In fact, I need to go to the Electric Line or I won't get home before curfew."

"OK. I'll walk you."

"Thanks!"

We walked to the subway, took it south, and got off so we could walk to the Electric Line station. When we got to the platform, I remembered I'd left my bag at Bob's house.

"My bag," I said.

"If you don't need anything, I can bring it to school on Monday," he offered.

"I appreciate it. I don't need the skirt or blouse tomorrow or Monday."

The train was at the platform, so Bob walked me to the door of the train. I turned gave him a quick hug, then got onto the train. He had to hurry to get to the L, so

he was home before curfew, so he left right away. I chose to sit in the upper deck, and put in my earphones, then turned on my iPod.

 Matthew

"Remember we'll be in Indianapolis next weekend," I said to Chelsea when we climbed into bed on Friday evening.

"I saw you wrote it on the calendar. Do we have our own room?"

"Eduardo booked a two-bedroom suite for Saturday night. We'll have a car take us to the track."

"Is there any doubt about the champion?"

"No. For drivers, Michael Schumacher is running away with it. There are only two races remaining -- the US Grand Prix and Suzuka -- and he has an insurmountable lead. Barrichello could only score twenty points and Schumacher is more than sixty points ahead. Incredibly, Schumacher has finished first or second in every race so far, except Malaysia, where he finished third. And for constructors, Ferrari has more than twice as many points as Williams."

"Are there any American drivers?"

"No."

"What time are we leaving on Saturday?"

"7:00am," I replied. "That gets us to the hotel in Indianapolis around 11:00am."

"Do we have any plans?"

"No. We couldn't go down early because of school for you, Michael, and me, and work for Eduardo, so we won't go to the track until Sunday morning. If there's something you want to do in Indianapolis, just let me know."

"Just be with you! Make love to me?"

She didn't have to ask twice!

XXVI. Compromise

September 22, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Sunday morning, after cuddle time with Dad and breakfast, I stayed in the kitchen to bake a cake for Philip, and was happy that Yuriko decided to keep me company. She was totally cool, and I was going to miss her when she finally went back to Japan after finishing her degree in horticulture.

"What kind of cake are you planning to make?" Yuriko asked.

"I think chocolate cake with fudge icing," I replied. "It'll be from a box because I don't have all the ingredients I'd need to make it from scratch."

"Do you plan to serve lunch, too?"

"Yes. I was thinking just soup, sandwiches, and chips. He's going out to dinner with his parents, though, so even that might be too much."

"Not if you serve smaller portions," Yuriko suggested. "Perhaps a cup of soup, half a sandwich, and some chips, then with cake for dessert."

"That makes sense! How did you learn so much about cooking and entertaining?"

"It's normal for Japanese girls to learn. One of our duties is to care for the house, which means entertaining, which is very important in Japanese society. When I

go home, I will help my grandfather with the farm, but also assist my grandmother with the house."

"But if you're the expert in farming, why do those things?"

Yuriko smiled, "Duty, Birgit-chan! I might ask why you do things for your father! The answer is the same!"

"But it's not duty, it's because I love him and want to please him!"

"Yes, and that is true for me when I do those things, both for your father and for my family. You Americans are too focused on yourselves as individuals, instead of members of a community. Japan is more like what Albert calls 'The Compound', where everyone looks out for the family first, and for themselves second. Even you!"

"Hey!" I protested.

Yuriko laughed softly, "What is the American idiom? If the shoe fits?"

"Grr!"

"But it's true, Birgit-chan. And you don't actually object, except in principle. You would sacrifice for anyone in your family, just as they would sacrifice for you. If you were in trouble, your family would do everything possible to help you, just as you would for them."

"You might have a point," I admitted.

"Do not things turn out better when you work together with your family or friends, than if you try to do everything for yourself, to your own benefit?"

"Maybe," I replied.

"Be honest, please, Birgit-chan!"

"Yes."

"And is it not more important to protect and help the family than to do things simply to please yourself? Again, please be honest."

"Yes."

"Then your situation is no different from mine, except that society expects us to work together for the greater good, rather than solely seek our own good. Both community good and personal good may be achieved at the same time, as your family shows."

"This is where Dad says 'I hate you!' to everyone except Liz!"

"He has never said that to me," Yuriko said with a smile. "Because he understands the Japanese ways, and respects them, and, to some extent, practices them. Does he not run his company for the benefit of everyone who works for him? Just as he manages his family to the benefit of all the members? And for his friends, as well?"

"Yes."

"Then I would have no need to correct him!"

"Good luck with THAT idea!" I giggled. "He's still a 'dumb boy' at times!"

"You're mistaken, Birgit-chan!" Yuriko said.

"How so? Boys do dumb things!"

"Yes, they do, but your definition of 'dumb' when you refer to your dad is when he doesn't do things you want him to do the way you want him to do them! That's not 'dumb', that's simply being different. Men and women are different, and we should celebrate those differences. Would you prefer your friend who is joining you for lunch behaved like a girl in every way?"

"Well, no," I admitted.

"Then, perhaps, you should celebrate the differences between men and women, and not expect men to behave exactly as you demand they do."

"But Dad does what you want!" I protested.

"Because I *demand* he do things, or because he strives to make me happy?"

"Grr!"

Yuriko laughed softly, "Which is the sound you make when someone shows you that you are mistaken and you do not wish to admit it!"

"Can we please make the cake?" I requested.

"Yes, of course. But please consider what I have said."

"I will," I agreed, mostly so I could end the conversation.

 Jesse

My mobile phone had rung while I was on the way to church, and following Dad's rule, I didn't answer it, or even look to see who was calling, as in an

emergency, dad or my moms would call twice in a row, which would let me know I'd need to pull over to check the phone. The phone chirped a minute later, signalling someone had left a voice mail, which I'd check once I arrived at church. About fifteen minutes later, I parked and was able to check the message.

"Jesse, it's Nicholas. They are letting me out of prison! Come see me after church! Bye!"

I laughed because he had been in the hospital overnight, not in 'prison' but Aunt Jessica said that people really did not like staying in the hospital, and often felt as if they were being watched by prison guards because of the way doctors, nurses, and medical students were constantly checking on them.

I thought about calling him back, but the way his message sounded, he was just leaving the hospital so he wouldn't be home for a bit, and he didn't have a mobile phone. I powered off the phone, stashed it in the glove compartment because nobody was supposed to have a phone in the nave during services, then went into the church. I took a spot near where the college kids usually stood and waited for the service to begin.

Just under four hours later, after lunch and Sunday School, I went out to the car, got my phone, powered it on, and called Nicholas to make sure it was OK to come over. He said it was, so I texted Dad because I had his car, and set off for Nicholas' house.

 Birgit

"Hi!" I exclaimed when Philip arrived at the house. "I have lunch ready, and cake for dessert!"

I led him to the kitchen where I had vegetable soup, ham and cheese sandwiches, and Ruffles on plates, along with glasses of lemonade. The cake was on the

island as well, along with plates and a spatula. We sat down on stools at the island and we began to eat.

"You made this all by yourself?" he asked.

"Me, Campbell's, Weber's Bakery, JM Smucker, Frito-Lay, Tropicana, and Duncan Hines!"

Philip laughed, "OK, I meant you prepared it all yourself!"

"I had some help from Yuriko, a Japanese girl who stays with us while she's studying at UofC, but I could have done it alone. It's more fun to do together. My dad actually taught me to cook."

"Your dad?"

"He learned to cook growing up, and then experimented a lot while he was in college. My biological mom is a great baker, but only an OK cook. My other mom is a doctor who would have trouble turning on the stove!"

"I doubt that very much!" Philip declared.

"She never learned to cook and ate cafeteria food in college and takeout in medical school! Well, until she met my dad!"

"Your family is very strange."

"That's a *good* thing!" I declared. "Why be like everyone else, especially when most people either have their head up their butt or a stick up their butt?! Or worse, both! My dad thinks we should not just march to the beat of a different drummer, but write our own music!"

"Doesn't that cause trouble?"

"All the time with busybodies, prudes, and the government. But f...the heck with them! Everyone in my family, and our close friends we call 'cousins', but who really aren't cousins, are all mature and have our sh...poop in one group!"

"I have heard swearwords before!" Philip said with a smile. "Just not from fourteen-year-old girls."

"Do I act like any fourteen-year-old girl you know?"

"No."

"Exactly!"

"So why stop yourself from using those words?"

"Because society can't handle them! I'm allowed to use any word I know, except one."

"What word is that?"

"The real 'F' word! 'Fair'. I can say 'fuck you' to anyone in the house and not get in trouble, but if I say 'not fair', I'm in deep shit!"

"You're joking!" Philip protested.

"No, I'm not! Dad says that people who say 'not fair' really mean that they didn't get what they wanted, and usually got what they deserved. Saying 'not fair' is usually whining and is almost never correct. People who want something for nothing whine about 'not fair'. People who know you have to work to get what you want, do not. Guess which kind of people make things better?"

"What happens if you say it?"

"Dad shows us what 'not fair' really means! It would be something like doing all the chores in the house instead of dividing them equitably between everyone based on their ability and available time."

"Did you swallow a philosophy book?"

I giggled, "No, but I've read plenty! Including Plato, Sun Tzu, Lao Tse, Dostoyevsky, and others! And I've read *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *The Stranger*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and a bunch of other stuff that either touches on or is directly philosophy."

"In ninth grade?"

"I read Plato's *Republic* in fifth grade and *Stranger in a Strange Land* in sixth."

"I didn't read those until I was a Senior or in college."

"You should see Dad's library. He has thousands of books, and he's read most of them. Well, not all the reference books, but history, theology, philosophy, political science, and so on. And he encourages all of us to read and discuss those books. I told you about the Hangouts we have where we discuss philosophy, politics, and current events."

"And your siblings?"

"The same, but not always the same stuff. We read what interests us. I mean, I read fiction, too, like Harry Potter or *A Song of Ice and Fire*. My brothers like Tom Clancy. My sisters and I read girl stuff, too, like *The Princess Diaries*."

"I don't have time to read, really, except for what I have to read for school."

"Then you make time! Maybe play less *Dungeons & Dragons* and read more!"

"No way! I love that, along with my SCA stuff."

"Books are the best, but each person has to make their own decisions."

We finished eating, and I lit one candle on the cake and had Philip blow it out.

"Happy birthday!" I said.

"Thanks."

I cut pieces of cake for each of us, serving him first. We ate our cake, then I put the dishes into the sink to wash after Philip left and we went up to my room to listen to music. I put on a CD of *Angels with Dirty Faces*, an import album by the British Girl Band Sugababes that Henry had given me, and we sat on the loveseat.

"Will you do something for me?" I asked.

"What?" Philip asked apprehensively.

"Forget that I'm fourteen and just treat me like a normal young woman, please."

"I don't know," Philip said.

"Just think about it, please. Can I see you again next weekend?"

"I'm busy Saturday and Sunday, but I could probably see you on Friday."

"You could come with my brother, me, and our friends to Giordano's. We'll probably come back here to watch a movie because nothing interesting is being released this week."

"Is everyone like you?"

"There is NOBODY like me!" I declared. "But if you mean mature and intelligent, absolutely. And nobody will give you or me any grief about you being in college. My brother Jesse is a Junior in High School and one of his girlfriends is a Sophomore in college."

"One of?"

"He goes out with different girls, and doesn't have one he considers his regular girlfriend. Be here about 5:30pm on Friday, OK?"

"Sure," Philip agreed.

I smiled, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He tensed, so I just leaned back to listen to the CD. I really wanted a good kiss, but that would likely freak him out, because he still couldn't see past me being fourteen.

 Jesse

"When can you play?" I asked Nicholas when I arrived at his house.

"If I'm not dizzy, don't have headaches, and don't have double vision, I'll be cleared for our game against the British International School in two weeks."

"That's cool. Any symptoms?"

"Not since yesterday afternoon," Nicholas replied. "I felt fine this morning except for a slight headache, which the doctor said is normal."

"Will you be in school tomorrow?"

"Yes. And I can skate starting Thursday because we have no contact."

"Did you let coach know?"

"He called before. Will you pick me up starting on Thursday morning?"

"Absolutely. Do you have to stay home today?"

"Yes. Tomorrow I can do my normal routine except for skating."

"How is your mom?"

"She was really concerned, but Tom got her to chill. I just wish she and your dad would solve their problem."

"Me, too, but we have to stay completely out of it. The last thing we need is for your mom to decide to move you to a different school."

"Yeah," Nicholas agreed. "That would suck."

 Birgit

At 3:00pm, I walked Philip to the door, and we said 'goodbye'. I didn't try to kiss him again, because he'd been so nervous. We said 'goodbye' and I headed back to my room. I turned on the computer and was happy to see Katy online.

DadsPumpkin: Hi!

AppleOrchardKaty: Hi! How are you?

DadsPumpkin: Good. Boys are a pain!

AppleOrchardKaty: Now what?

DadsPumpkin: I met a guy I really like, but he's a Sophomore at IIT and he's freaked out by me being fourteen.

AppleOrchardKaty: You do remember you aren't 'legal', right?

DadsPumpkin: The government can go fuck themselves and keep their nose out of who I want to fuck!

AppleOrchardKaty: I know you believe that, as does your dad. So do I, but the law won't take that into account, and you know it. Not to mention the age difference.

DadsPumpkin: Oh, please! Grandpa Adams is twenty years older than Grandma Adams! Don is ten years older than Doctor Mary! General Dmitry is at least ten years older than Tanya!

AppleOrchardKaty: Yes, but when did those women start seeing those men? I know your grandma was in her twenties when she met your grandpa!

DadsPumpkin: 🤔

AppleOrchardKaty: Tell me about him.

DadsPumpkin: His name is Philip, and he's a computer science major at IIT who lives in the dorms. He's about four inches taller than me, decent looking, and smart. He's a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism and knows how to fence, you know, fight with swords. He also plays Dungeons & Dragons and likes science fiction.

AppleOrchardKaty: Where's he from?

DadsPumpkin: Naperville. He moved into the dorms to get away from his parents. He thinks his dad is too straitlaced and controlling.

AppleOrchardKaty: Sounds like a classic nerd!

DadsPumpkin: You mean like my dad? 🤔

AppleOrchardKaty: Your dad gave up being a nerd when he discovered girls were WAY more fun than computers. I think he was fourteen!

DadsPumpkin: I was teasing, obviously.

AppleOrchardKaty: Obviously. What have you done?

DadsPumpkin: Not that, obviously!

AppleOrchardKaty: You have a one-track mind! You know what I meant.

DadsPumpkin: Met for coffee, met for burgers, watched a movie and listened to music together, and I made lunch and a cake for him today for his birthday.

AppleOrchardKaty: And?

DadsPumpkin: I thought you said not that! 😊

AppleOrchardKaty: OK, not that first!

DadsPumpkin: Just kissed him on the cheek. He seemed super nervous and flinched.

AppleOrchardKaty: There might be another reason besides you being fourteen.

DadsPumpkin: What?

AppleOrchardKaty: Has he had a girlfriend before?

DadsPumpkin: No idea, but he's twenty!

AppleOrchardKaty: So? In my experience, guys who play D&D don't usually have girlfriends.

DadsPumpkin: Just no way! He's twenty!

AppleOrchardKaty: You have to consider it. How 'sexually aggressive' have you been?

DadsPumpkin: I haven't! I haven't mentioned it, or tried anything, or even hinted at it beyond kissing his cheek.

AppleOrchardKaty: Who are you and what have you done with the real Birgit?

DadsPumpkin: 😊

AppleOrchardKaty: It's something to seriously consider. But I'm curious, why be coy?

DadsPumpkin: Yuriko.

AppleOrchardKaty: You could do a lot worse than take advice on how to be subtle and demure from a Japanese woman.

DadsPumpkin: Japan is weird!

AppleOrchardKaty: And I'm sure they think the same thing about us! But you seem to have listened.

DadsPumpkin: Let's just say she has a different perspective

and it might have some value.

AppleOrchardKaty: Being subtle is not your strong suit.

DadsPumpkin: You think? 🤔

AppleOrchardKaty: I know! But you seem to have learned from your experiences here and from Yuriko. That's a good thing. Consider what I've said.

DadsPumpkin: I will.

AppleOrchardKaty: Good! I need to get back to my spreadsheet. Chat soon! L8r!

DadsPumpkin: L8r!

I wondered if Katy could be right about the possibility Philip had never had a girlfriend. That just seemed weird to me, but I knew some people were like that, though it was mostly girls like Tabitha who didn't date or have a serious boyfriend until they were out of High School, if even then. I knew Mom's dad, who I'd never met because he'd died, had intended for her to never date, but then she met Dad and, I giggled, wanted to fuck! I got up from my desk and left my room, wondering what my sisters were up to.

 Steve

"How was your day?" I asked Jessica when Kara, Suzanne, and I met her outside the ER on Sunday evening.

"Busy, but no GSWs, which is normal when the temps are in the 50s and low 60s."

"That does correlate pretty closely," I replied.

"There is some discussion about creating a clinic, but I'm not sure we can do that because of EMTALA."

"A law which forbids you from sending on emergent patients to an attached clinic is flat-out stupid," I declared.

"No kidding! And while it doesn't specifically prevent that, the 'examination' requirement would likely be enforced by juries against us if someone brought suit."

I nodded, "It would, because juries hate hospitals and insurance companies."

"But if they were examined in the clinic, wouldn't that suffice?" Kara asked.

"No," Jessica replied. "It requires the 'Emergency Department' to provide treatment. And you know someone would raise a discrimination claim if, say, black or Hispanic patients were sent to the clinic in a higher percentage than whites or Asians. The problem is demographics in this area almost certainly guarantee it would be that way, given the income disparity between this side of the Dan Ryan and the other side and the racial makeup of both areas."

"So you can't do something that's in the patient's and the hospital's best interests because of that law?" Suzanne asked.

"Correct," Jessica replied. "Even though they'd be able to be seen quicker, we cannot direct them away from the Emergency Department without risking a lawsuit for failing to examine them."

"What if the clinic was part of the Emergency Department?" I asked.

"Nobody knows, and there is a risk that someone would claim discrimination, as I mentioned above. The only safe practice is to see patients in order of the severity of their complaint."

"Driven by lawyers, of course," I said, shaking my head.

"Plaintiffs' lawyers," Suzanne said. "Ambulance chasers, not defense attorneys or attorneys like Liz, Ben, or Karl."

"True," I agreed.

"Did Patricia and David get settled?" Jessica asked.

"Yes. They're all moved into Birgit's and Albert's rooms, respectively. Stephanie and Joel will see the judge first thing tomorrow, then they're off to Monaco for two weeks."

"How are they getting to school?"

"I'll take them," Kara said. "They're at the parochial school, so it's not too far out of my way."

We arrived home, and after Jessica had a quick shower, we had our extended family dinner.



September 23, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"Good morning!" Barbara said from the door to my office.

"Morning!" I replied. "All set in the apartment?"

"Yes. Kimmy is on top of things, as always. I just wanted to say 'hi', and I promised your sister I wouldn't bother you!"

"I think the company is in good hands with you here while my sister is in Monte Carlo gambling away some of that filthy lucre Samantha paid her!"

"Right, because she's going to spend ANY time in the casino!"

"They've been living together for two months, so I suspect they'll have time for fine dining and the casino."

"I'll be in Stephanie's office if you need me."

"Thanks, Barbara."

She left, and I resumed my review of the final draft of the revised design documents and coding standards. I'd barely begun reading when Aisyah came to the door of the office.

"Do you have a moment?" she asked.

"Certainly," I replied. "Come in."

She changed her shoes and came into the office, and we went to sit at the low table where my usual morning pot of tea was waiting. I offered her some, and she accepted, so I poured for both of us.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"I'm pregnant!" she declared, something that didn't surprise me at all.

"Congratulations! I'm sure Hassan and your parents are pleased."

"They are!"

"When are you due?"

"Late April," she replied.

"Make sure you speak to Bob about maternity benefits. And don't forget we offer daycare."

"I will. I need to let Larry know so he can plan for my maternity leave."

"And if there is anything you need, let me know."

Aisyah smiled, "Thank you."

We finished our tea, and she left, and I went back to my desk. I managed to read and make notes on a few minor changes before Penny arrived, about an hour late, as she'd had a doctor's appointment.

"Clean bill of health?" I asked.

"You could do your own thorough exam and find out!" Penny suggested.

"I'll accept your doctor's opinion," I replied.

"You are just no fun!" Penny grouched.

 Jesse

"Jesse, do you have a moment?" Ebele asked, coming up to me after I finished eating lunch with Libby, Lilibeth, and Freddy.

"Sure," I replied. "What's up?"

"I asked Mrs. Salazar about extra help in Spanish, and she suggested I ask if you would be willing to tutor me."

I almost laughed because that was a turnabout from Rachel tutoring me in Spanish, and, of course, Aunt Melanie tutoring Dad, though I was reasonably sure they did more French than Spanish!

"I haven't tutored anyone before," I replied. "But I could probably help."

"Cool! When?"

"After school," I replied. "We can go to Starbucks or a diner, or you can come to my house, though my moms won't be home."

"Starbucks is probably better," Ebele said, "because my Dad would lose his shit if he knew I was in your house with no parents at home."

"OK. Meet outside school at the end of the day?"

"Sure! See you then!"

She walked away, and Libby and I headed for our next class.

"Tutoring, huh?" Libby teased.

"I don't believe I need to point out that Ebele and I are meeting at Starbucks."

"What kind of crime is 'starbucking'?" Libby asked.

I laughed, "Wow! A *Battlestar Galactica* reference! I'm impressed!"

"And Ebele will be impressed at your French skills!" Libby teased.

I laughed because of what I'd thought about earlier about Dad and Aunt Melanie.

"We'll see," I said.

"You don't have a regular schedule the way you did last year. You're only seeing Brooke, right?"

"Yes, and you, occasionally."

"I just wish Lilibeth was interested in guys, even a little bit."

"Don't push her."

"Never!" Libby declared. "I know better than that!"

"Just making sure," I replied.

"If you aren't busy after dinner tomorrow, I wouldn't mind a few hours of 'up close and personal' time!"

"I think that can be arranged!"

 Birgit

"What grade is your brother Albert in?" Fangsu asked at lunch.

"Eighth. Why?"

"He's tall and cute!"

"And he has a steady girlfriend in England," I replied.

"England?"

"A girl named Jane. Her dad is a doctor and stayed with us for a year while he was on an exchange program at UofC Hospital. She came to visit and she and Albert really liked each other. He goes to visit her in England every Summer, and she comes to visit with her family sometimes. I'm positive they'll eventually get married."

In fact, they already felt they were married, but that was one of those 'family things' we didn't talk about because there were too many idiots in the world.

"Oh," Fangsu said, sounding bummed.

"If you're looking for interesting guys, you should talk to one of the guys on Jesse's hockey team. Freddy, Mitch, Tom, and Pete are all pretty cool."

"But you aren't interested?"

"My brother doesn't date my friends and I don't date his friends," I replied.

"Neither of us would care, but it's just easier to not have to worry about any drama if there was a bad breakup."

"That actually makes sense. What's up with you and Bob?"

"We're just photo buddies," I replied.

"Are you going out with anyone?"

"No, but my friend Philip will join us on Friday night."

"Who's that?"

"A guy I met about a month ago."

"Does he go to school here?"

"No. He's in college."

"Whoa!" Fangsu gasped. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"You don't think he's too old for you?"

"No, I don't."

"But won't a guy in college expect..."

I giggled, "I've done that and I liked it!"

"Seriously?" Fangsu asked sounding surprised. "You're fourteen and you aren't a virgin?"

"Seriously. I'm old enough to decide for myself if I want to do that, and I did and I do!"

"But you could get pregnant!" Fangsu protested.

"I'm taking birth control pills," I replied. "I'm really careful about them, and if something happened despite using contraception, I'd take care of it at the clinic."

"You mean have an abortion?"

"Yes. There's no way I would have a baby at fourteen!"

"What's it like?"

"It feels really good! Well, assuming the guy knows what he's doing! Or the girl, if you prefer."

"I think I'm too young to do that."

"Which is fine," I replied. "Each of us has to make up our own minds and do what's best for us."

"Was it before you turned fourteen?"

"No. It was after."

"More than once?"

"Yes. Have you read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*?"

"No. What's that book?"

"It's about puberty and adolescence and also has a chapter on sex. You really should read it, even if you don't plan to have sex for a few years, or even until you get married."

"I don't think I'll wait that long."

"I'll give you a copy of the book. We have a case at home."

"A case?"

"Dad wants us to make sure all our friends have all the information they need to make good decisions."

"Thanks. Homework at your house after clubs today?"

"Yes! And I can give you the book then."

 Jesse

"This is your first year of a foreign language?" I asked Ebele when we sat down with coffee at Starbucks.

"Yes. I didn't take Spanish last year because I wanted to take the computer class they offered."

"A cheerleader in computer class?" I smirked. "What's next? *Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together...mass hysteria!*"

Ebele laughed, "*Ghostbusters!* And not all cheerleaders are airheads!"

"Actually, I know most aren't," I replied. "It's a dumb stereotype. Most of the guys on the hockey team aren't 'dumb jocks'. What problem are you having?"

"Conjugation. We don't really do that in English, except for a few strange verbs like 'to be'."

"Fundamentally, you have to memorize the irregular ones, and memorize the rules for '-ar', '-er', and '-ir' verbs. Right now, you're only dealing with present tense, so that's what we'll work on. Do you have your book?"

"Yes. And the worksheets."

She took out her book and worksheets and scooted her chair around the small table so she was sitting next to me. We spent close to an hour going over the rules and practicing with the '-ar' verbs on the worksheet. By the end of the tutoring session, she basically had the '-ar' verbs down, but she'd need to practice regularly. Ebele packed up her book and worksheets and we started walking towards her house.

"How many times a week did you want tutoring?" I asked.

"With cheer practice, I can only do Mondays, unless it's after dinner," Ebele replied.

"OK. Then we'll plan on Mondays. You can't go out on Fridays with the gang until football season ends, right?"

"Right. December, if we don't make the playoffs, and we won't. Then I'll have Fridays free."

"You know you're always welcome."

"Thanks. Maybe we could hang out some time?"

"When do you have free time?"

"The weekends, during the day, except for Sunday morning when we go to church."

"I go to church as well."

"Where?"

"Holy Virgin Protection Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Des Plaines. You?"

"Zion Pentecostal at 40th and Cottage Grove in Bronzeville."

One thing was for sure, and that was we weren't going to church together!

"I usually get home around 1:30pm, and on alternate Sundays we have our Hangout."

Maybe Saturday afternoon?" Ebele suggested.

"Our hockey game this week is at 10:00am. How about lunch at my house at 1:00pm?"

"Will your moms be home?"

"Probably, but if not, we can go over to the main house and there will be someone your parents would consider an adult there."

"That sounds good!"



September 24, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Do you want to do homework today?" Fangsu asked at lunch. "I know we usually only do that on Monday and Wednesday after club."

"On Tuesdays and Thursdays my friend Peter comes over."

"He's the one?"

He was one of 'the ones', but I wasn't sure I should share that with Fangsu. And that reminded me, that I needed to let Peter know that Philip would be joining our usual Friday night group.

"Yes, though please do not share that."

"I wouldn't. But you said you were seeing the older boy, Philip. Would you do it with him, too?"

Of course I would, because he was interesting, and I liked him. The question really was would he do it with me. I wondered if Katy's assessment of the situation was correct and he wasn't experienced. I almost laughed thinking about what she'd said about Dad, and I suspected that had he not met Melanie, he might have been very different.

Being with Aunt Jennie and Birgit Andersson hadn't changed him, according to Mom, though she never let on if she knew about Dad and Jennie. I'd figured it out, so I was sure Mom had figured it out, too, even if Dad hadn't told her. I almost laughed a second time when I realized I was like Melanie for Peter, and might be for Philip, too.

"Maybe," I replied. "I absolutely don't think it's something you only do with one person for your whole life, the way some people do. Peter and I aren't a couple, so I'm free to see other guys or even do it with other guys if I want to."

And I'd already been with three guys and a girl, so that ship had sailed almost immediately! None of my friends believed you had to wait for marriage or only do it with one guy for your whole life. The only people I knew who believed that were hyper-religious girls like Matthew's friend Maggie and the girls at

Kenwood Academy who were like Mom was in High School, before she met Dad and decided fucking was better than sitting in church for hours!

"It doesn't mean anything to you?"

"It can," I replied, "but it can also just be for fun. One thing Dad taught me is that true intimacy isn't about sex, but about being close to someone and, how do I put this simply? I suppose having a special connection with them is the easiest way to put it without going into the philosophy."

"Can I change subjects?"

"Sure."

"What do you believe?"

"I don't have any use for any gods," I replied. "I prefer Eastern wisdom like Buddhism, which doesn't need a god or gods to make sense. I think the best way to say it is that I trust philosophy, not religion. Basically, I don't need some magical, invisible 'friend' telling me what to do and what not to do. Are you religious?"

"We're Christian, but we don't go to church very often. Usually only Christmas and Easter."

"My brother is Russian Orthodox, and goes to church every Sunday, but I haven't been in a church in years, and have no plans to be in one, except for weddings or whatever. I was actually in a mosque back in May."

"For?"

"A wedding. One of my dad's employees got married, and he acted as her guardian because her parents are in California. It's a dumb tradition, but it's what she wanted."

The warning bell rang, so we got up from the table and returned our trays, then headed for our next class.

 Steve

"Dad?" Birgit said from the door of my study after we had returned home from karate. "Bethany and Tom are here."

"Did they say what they wanted?" I asked.

"To speak to you. They're in the foyer because I wasn't sure what was going on."

"Ask them to come in, please."

Birgit left and about thirty seconds later, Tom and Bethany came into my study. I nodded towards the chairs, and after Tom shut the door, they sat down.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"You know that Bethany wants to revise her book," Tom said. "She knows you won't agree if she changes what you call the 'sex positive' message."

"That about sums it up," I replied. "I'm happy to have her revise even that section, so long as the tone doesn't change, and it doesn't push what you both know I believe to be terribly mistaken."

"All because..." Bethany began.

"Bethany!" Tom said firmly. "We discussed this, and Steve's motivation is completely irrelevant. You two do not see eye-to-eye on this, and neither of you is willing to budge. He is, though, willing to compromise, and he's met you more than halfway."

"No, he hasn't!" Bethany growled.

"Bethany..." Tom warned again. "Steve, what commitments do you need?"

"I'd like to see the revised manuscript, and I'd need to approve the final proof before it's printed. I promise that so long as the message and tone do not change, and the 'power disparity' concept is not pushed to extremes, I won't block publication. And I'm OK with including 'power disparity' in the consent section, so long as it focuses on actual disparities of power such as teachers and students or managers and employees and other similar situations."

"That's acceptable," Tom said. "Right, Bethany?"

"If he thinks..."

"Bethany, enough," Tom said, exasperated. "You agreed to a compromise!"

I kept quiet, because I knew that anything I said had the potential to set Bethany off. Tom was really trying, but she was being intransigent. I felt I was being reasonable, but I knew that from her perspective, I had, in effect, 'stolen' her book, and nothing I could do short of complete capitulation would fix that.

In theory, I *could* do that, but to me, that would do significant harm to society, though evidence suggested society was going to hell in a hand basket with or without the book. That said, I wasn't going to do anything that might accelerate the descent into insanity and the moral panic that had gripped the country over teenage sex, and sex in general.

"Fine," Bethany growled. "He wins!"

"Steve, I'll make sure you see the final manuscript," Tom said. "And I'm sure the publisher will send you the proof before it's printed."

"Thanks, Tom. I hope to see you at Guys' Night. And Bethany is welcome to join the women for Girls' Night Out."

Bethany looked daggers at me, but didn't say anything. I was positive that was due to Tom's hand on her arm, as I could see she was seething.

"Jesse said Nicholas is doing better," I continued. "And that he's allowed to skate as of Thursday."

"He is," Tom said. "It turned out to just be a mild concussion and the helmet basically did its job."

"I'm happy to hear that," I replied. "And I look forward to seeing him on the ice a week from Saturday."

"Me, too," Tom agreed. "We'll head out now. I'll see you on Saturday."

"That makes me happy."

We shook, but Bethany didn't raise her hand to shake or appear to be interested in a hug, so I walked them to the door, said 'good night', and after they had left, called Samantha to let her know the agreement I'd reached with Tom.

XXVII. A New Approach to Life

September 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"What's that?" Penny asked, looking over my shoulder when she came into the office on Wednesday morning.

"The new *Phoenix* web browser from Mozilla."

"Is that something we're going to support?"

"Eventually, because the last thing we want is *Internet Destroyer* to define the web the way *Windows* defined the desktop, or for Microsoft to fuck it up the way they have email."

Penny laughed, "Your dislike for Microsoft is legendary, almost as much as you dislike the Bush family!"

"Not even close!"

"Why eventually?"

"This is release 0.1," I replied. "It's bare-bones. Reading through their project documents, they'll release about once a week for a month, expanding features, then settle down to about every ninety days. From what I can tell, it will be serviceable in about six months, which is about the time it'll be available on the Mac. I figure it'll be in good enough shape for us to begin testing in a serious way in November."

"Is this your project?"

"That's up to Dave," I replied. "The Managed Services team will likely support it first for everything except NIKA Legal and NIKA Medical. That will help us work out some of the kinks and file bug reports as necessary with Mozilla."

"Why 'Phoenix'?"

"Because it's rising from the ashes of *Netscape Navigator*."

"What are we working on today?"

"The most exciting thing ever in the history of the world!" I declared. "A design review meeting."

"Ugh! I hate those as much as you do!"

"A necessary evil," I replied. "Fortunately, Julia keeps them as short as humanly possible, and Cindi is always reasonable."

My desk phone chirped, and I saw in the display it was Elyse.

"Hi," she said when I answered. "Would you come to my office?"

"Yes, but I have a design meeting in about fifteen minutes."

"It shouldn't take that long."

"Be right there."

I hung up, left my office, changed shoes, and headed to Elyse's office. She indicated I should shut the door.

"What's up?" I asked after closing the door and sitting on her couch.

"I received two letter notices today. One from the IRS for an audit and one from the SEC inquiring about our ESOP plan and our issuance of preferred shares."

"Is the SEC alleging violations?"

"No. The letter is not really any different from an IRS audit. It's the same thing."

"Does it seem strange to you that you received both of those on the same day?"

"Yes, because the only way that happens except by some one-in-a-billion chance is a coordinated effort."

"My money is on either Jameson Miller or some friends of the Brauns," I replied. "I can't imagine anyone else who might be upset enough. Miller is a failed lawyer, but it wouldn't surprise me if he didn't have friends in government, having been from the DC area. Do we have anything to worry about? I mean, besides the usual bullshit that comes with 'Imperial Entanglements'?"

"With regard to income and payroll taxes, you know we don't make use of any creative tax accounting or any loopholes. Yes, we engage in tax avoidance, but that's our patriotic duty! Will they find something? I'd bet on it, and it'll be something like last time where we made a minor error which is resolved by paying the additional tax due, if any, as well as interest and a small penalty."

"The SEC inquiry is by far the riskier of the two. We, our accountants, and Samantha's team all believe we've complied with the law. NIKA's stock is designated as 'closely held' and we're not trading publicly. Even if we were, we'd be designated as a 'Closely Held Corporation' under SEC regulations because 50% of the shares are owned by five or fewer individuals. Your ownership of more than half the shares makes that automatic. Even if you dipped under fifty

percent, then Cindi, Dave, Julia, and I would comprise enough shares to take us well over fifty percent.

"In any event, we follow all SEC regulations, and the vast majority of stock not held by the founders is held by the ESOP with option grants to NIKA employees. The only share sales which are made are when you sell to the ESOP, or if someone exercises their options, which has only been done in an exercise/sell arrangement where shares never actually change hands. We've been over that with Bo, the tax and corporate law team at McCarthy/Jenkins, as well as Ben van Hoek's firm."

"What's the worst-case scenario?"

"A fine, and we're told to be good little boys and girls in the future. There's no real chance of claims of securities fraud because we're not marketing securities except to current employees who have detailed financials and complete disclosure, which you know is rare amongst corporations, whether privately held or publicly traded."

"So, in the end, it's going to cost us time and money, and possibly some bad PR if the SEC or IRS decide to make a stink about some minor point."

"That's about it."

"OK. As Stephanie's away on her honeymoon, and I don't want to bother her with this, give Ned a call and let him know we'll use his firm, and then coordinate with Liz."

"That's why I brought it to you. I know Barbara is running things, but this is extraordinary."

"It is. Another thing, and I'm sure Stephanie will agree, when the government does make their findings, we tell them that, so long as the fines are reasonable, we won't challenge them in court on the condition they keep the findings confidential."

"OK. I'll set aside the Orr room for the auditors' use once Liz and I reply to these letters."

"Sounds good. I doubt anything substantive will happen before Stephanie returns in about ten days, so just keep me posted on things, and she'll handle it when she's back."

"I'd have gone to her first if she wasn't on her honeymoon!"

"I'm going to our final design meeting for the next release of NIKA Legal."

"I'd rather stare at spreadsheets all day!"

"Me, too!" I chuckled.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Matt?" Mr. Camden said.

"It can never work," I replied.

"I think Sweden would disagree with you," Mr. Camden replied.

"If they were actually socialist, perhaps, but they aren't. Sweden has no minimum wage and guarantees the right to work without joining a union. In

addition, nearly all businesses are privately held, though the government does hold some shares in certain companies."

"OK, so that was a bad example."

"You won't find a good one," I replied. "As I said, it can never work."

"Why?"

"Because, as F. A. Hayek said, we humans suffer from a 'fatal conceit'. Our society -- locally, nationally, and globally -- is infinitely more complex than any one person, or even a small group of people, could ever possibly understand. It is the 'fatal conceit' of central planners that they presuppose enough knowledge to control all aspects of human existence."

"Would you tell the class who you are quoting, please?"

"Friedrich Hayek, an Austrian economist who died about ten years ago, who won the Nobel Prize for Economics for his work on how changing prices communicate information that helps individuals coordinate their plans. In a nutshell, it shows, among other things, that price controls conceal information, and lead consumers to make poor decisions, with overall negative impact on the economy. His work is seminal in defending classical liberalism, which we often refer to, somewhat inaccurately, as libertarianism, mostly to avoid the confusion in the US of 'liberal' and 'progressive'."

"Could you give us a concrete example?"

"Sure," I replied. "Anti-gouging laws. For example, when there is a gasoline shortage, the people who believe in central planning cap the price, which denies the price signal to consumers. In times of shortage, the price should go up, perhaps dramatically. As the price rises, individual consumers decide to buy or

not buy gasoline. As supplies decrease, prices increase, such that fewer people buy gasoline, or only buy exactly as much as they need, rather than hoarding it or panic buying."

"Anyone care to comment?" Mr. Camden asked. "Miss Moore?"

"It's not fair to poor people because they can't afford to buy gasoline," she replied. "By capping the price, everyone can afford to buy it."

"Matt?"

"And the supply will run out, as we've seen happen in Florida during hurricanes and other places, and *nobody* can buy gas, no matter how much money they have. If you allow the price to float, each consumer decides if the value they receive from the gasoline is worth the price at the pump. If there are no price signals, everyone panic buys, and your hypothetical poor person, who is working all day and can't sit in a gasoline line for four hours, cannot get gas at any price, while the stay-at-home-mom or people with the ability to take time off, can sit in those lines."

"But it's not fair if people can't afford it!" she protested.

I really wanted to smack my head on my desk, because she'd used the 'f' word, and at that point, no amount of logic was going to convince her. But, someone else in the class might learn something, so I had to try.

"And if there is no gas, they *still* can't buy it, so, in the end, the question is, should some gas be available to those who truly need it at \$8 a gallon, or no gas be available at \$1.45 a gallon?"

"It's just not fair!" she protested. "The oil companies get to make money from a shortage!"

"Actually, the oil companies own less than 1% of all US gas stations," I replied. "They're mostly owned by independent operators, like Chaz's dad."

"I think we'll move on," Mr. Camden said. "Let's return to our discussion of socialism."

When class ended, I had lunch, and joined Matt W, Arby, and Nick at a table.

"Matt, can you explain how that works?" Arby asked.

"Sure," I replied. "Let's say a gas station has a thousand gallons of gas. That's enough for about eighty cars to fill up with twelve gallons. You know there's a gas shortage, and you have three quarters of a tank, but see the price is still \$1.45, so you buy three gallons. If three other people do the same, now only seventy-nine cars can fill up. Got it so far?"

"Sure."

"When the station runs out of gas, there is no gas, so it doesn't matter what the price is, right?"

"Right."

"Using the previous example, say the nine gallons you have are enough for you to get to work and do your grocery shopping for a week. If the price were \$5.00, would you top off your tank?"

"Maybe, but I'd sure think twice about it."

"Which is exactly the point," I replied. "If you and those other three people have enough gas for the near term, you might decide not to buy, leaving gas for other

people. If the station comes closer to running out, they'll raise the price more to deter other casual fill ups, reserving gas for others who actually need it. In the end, there are only two possibilities if you can't add supply -- no gas at the regular price, or gas at a much higher price. Yes, they may eventually run out as the need for gas becomes acute for some people, but the supply will last longer. You saw what happened in Florida with the last gas shortage."

"All the stations rationed, but even then they ran out of gas, because people were willing to line up to fill their tanks."

"Yes, and think THAT through."

"Oh, shit! They burned gas waiting in line because if they didn't move every time the car in front moved, someone would cut in."

"Thereby making the problem even worse!"

"Damn!"

"Yeah. It's not perfect by any means, but the alternative is worse. Think about toys that are in limited supply -- what happens?"

"People buy them up, then resell them at higher prices."

"You can't repeal the law of supply and demand!" I declared. "Think about this, too. The perfect price for something is a price where the last item in stock sells out one second before the replacement supply arrives. Well, assuming the goal is to ensure availability for someone who needs the item. The price of a thing which is unavailable is irrelevant!"

"The other thing to consider is that when prices are capped, it discourages production. In some cases, it might mean nobody produces the good because

they can't make sufficient return on their investment, but it also discourages investment by new entrants into the market who see a chance to make a profit by producing a scarce good. Price signals work for manufacturers just as they do for consumers."

"There has to be a flaw," Nick protested.

"Sure, because people are not always rational. All a price signal can do is provide information. How people process that information and what actions they take are up to them. But, as Hayek demonstrated, those price signals are extremely important and we're worse off without them. He won the Nobel Prize for that work, as I said. Let me give you one more example. What does a store do if they are overstocked on something?"

"Put it on sale to encourage people to buy it," Nick replied.

"Yep. Here endeth the lesson!"

"You are NOT Sean Connery!" Matt W declared. "How did you learn that stuff?"

"From my dad," I replied.

"Changing subjects," Nick said, "are you still going to the US Grand Prix in Indianapolis this weekend?"

"Yes. We'll go down on Saturday morning. Hopefully, it'll be a good race. We have seats where we can see most of the course."

"They run the race partly in the infield, right?"

"Yes. It's the 'Grand Prix' track, which uses part of the oval, but mostly uses the infield road course."

"You follow NASCAR, too, right?"

"Yes. I go to one or two races every year. One in North Carolina and the one in Joliet."

"I'm having a Halloween Party," Arby said. "Are you going to your Dad's house?"

"That was the plan, but I could ask Chelsea to come out to the burbs and we could come to your party instead."

"Cool. Would you?"

"Sure. I'll discuss it with Chelsea this weekend and then let my dad know."

"Awesome!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Do you think I could photograph you in your natural habitat?" Bob asked after Photography Club.

"You want candid shots of a 'wild Birgit?" I asked with a smirk.

I was thinking of you at home doing your usual things. Even more casual than what we did for our photoshoot."

"Sounds like fun! When?"

"Saturday or Sunday, whichever works best for you."

"Why don't we do it on Saturday? I run with my dad around 6:00am, so be there before that, and you can shoot the entire day, including karate."

"6:00am?! On a Saturday?!"

"6:00am. On a Saturday."

"What kind of crazy person is willingly out of bed before 6:00am on Saturdays?"

"ME!" I declared. "I want to run with my dad and Suzanne, and I like the extra time I get with my dad after we run."

"Daddy's girl? I would never have guessed!"

I almost laughed because it was both true and not true.

"I am a strong, independent woman! But I also love my dad!"

"Which does not mean you aren't spoiled!"

I rolled my eyes, "There is more reality at my house than in ten episodes of *Big Brother!*"

"You watch Reality TV?"

"I've seen a few episodes. It's obviously not real, and I'm WAY more interesting than a bunch of self-absorbed Reality TV stars!"

"Speaking of self-absorbed..." Bob teased.

"Hey!" I protested.

"You do realize you can be spoiled and your life can still be 'real', right?"

"Except I don't get everything I want," I replied.

"Name one thing!"

I nearly blurted out, 'An expert deflowering by my dad!', but there was no way I could say that to Bob, or anyone else. But I also wasn't spoiled, because Dad and my moms required us to be mature, responsible members of the family. Sure, we were really well off because of the amount of money they made, but I didn't think my parents 'overindulged' us, they simply treated us as if we were adults.

"That's not the point, really," I said. "Sure, we have lots of nice stuff and a nice house, but none of us thinks we deserve anything. We all contribute at home, my parents work hard for what we have, and my parents expect all of us to act like mature, responsible adults. The privileges we have are because we've shown we can handle the responsibility."

"It seems as if I touched a nerve," Bob said.

I shook my head, "Not at all. You made a statement, and I refuted it with facts and logic. And if my answers frighten you, that's on you, not me!"

"Touchy, touchy!" Bob teased.

"One thing," I said. "Before you come over on Saturday, I need to tell you more about my family."

"It's blended, right?" Bob asked.

I smiled, "Yes, but not the way most people mean when they say that. It's a bit of obfuscation."

"Now you have me super curious."

I explained about Dad, my moms, Suzanne, and my dad's girlfriends, as well as Jesse's moms and Matthew and Michael's situation with their mom and Eduardo.

"OK, I was mistaken!" Bob declared. "Your *dad* is the one who's spoiled! I think I need to talk to him!"

I laughed, "Meghan and Mariana?"

"I believe they would kill me for even suggesting anything even remotely like that!"

"Are they your girlfriends?"

"I guess it depends on what you mean. They're both friends who are girls, and I've messed around a bit with them, but nothing serious."

He wasn't quite sixteen, so that didn't really surprise me. I knew Jesse, Matthew, and I were outside the norm. That got me to wondering about Bob in a way I hadn't really considered. We were 'camera buddies', but I wondered if he was interested in more. Except for Peter, I was focused on trying to find an older guy, but something about Bob intrigued me.

"That's kind of like me," I replied. "No serious boyfriend, though I do hang out with my friend Peter."

"You would be allowed to date at fourteen?"

"I'd have been allowed to date at six!" I giggled. "At age six, three of my four brothers basically had a steady girlfriend. Two of them are still together with the same girl, and the only reason the other one isn't is because when they hit puberty, the girl's mom lost her mind about the fact that her daughter might even think about sex, so she moved to Iowa to split them up."

"No way!"

"Sad but true," I replied. "Everyone was positive they'd eventually marry, but her psycho mom, who is in federal prison for kidnapping her, wrecked it."

"Whoa! You weren't kidding with that 'Reality TV' comment!"

"No, I wasn't. Oh, and my sister basically had a steady boyfriend from the time they were toddlers until recently."

"What happened?"

"She hit puberty, and he didn't, and she was upset he wanted to hang out with his guy friends sometimes."

"She sounds controlling!" Bob observed.

I shook my head, "No, she was overly emotional because of all the hormones. She's better now, and I suspect they'll get back together, eventually."

"Meghan was kind of bitchy when she started turning into a girl."

"Into a woman!" I declared fiercely.

"Touched a sore point, did I?" Bob asked.

I giggled, "It doesn't get sore if you touch it right!"

Bob laughed and shook his head, "You are bad, Birgit!"

"When I'm good, I'm good; when I'm bad, I'm better!"

"Hi, Birgit!" Fangsu declared, coming up to us. "Ready to go?"

"Yes," I replied. "See you Saturday at 6:00am. You'll probably want to bring a change of clothes if you're going to follow us on our run."

"See you then!" Bob declared.

Fangsu and I walked away, left the building, and began walking towards my house.

"More photos?" Fangsu asked.

"Yes. He wants to do a portfolio of me, just doing the usual things I do during the day."

"Are you having more fun modeling or taking pictures?"

"I like both, actually. I'm not as into photography as Bob is, but it's fun."

"You're certainly pretty enough to be a model."

"Thanks. You're very pretty as well."

"And this concludes the meeting of the Fangsu/Birgit mutual admiration society!"

"Concludes? We're just getting started!"

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

When I arrived home from school after play practice, I called Chelsea.

"Arby is having a Halloween Party on the 26th and invited us. I think we should go."

"Rather than your dad's party?"

"We can do both. My dad's will be on November 1st, so we don't have to choose between them."

"OK. Your dad's is costume optional. What about Arby's?"

"No costumes. And I heard from Albert that Dad's party is actually masquerade this year, so everyone will wear at least a mask, and they're providing them for anyone who doesn't have one."

"But doesn't everyone know each other?"

"Mostly, though there are usually new people at every party, either from the university, or Great Lakes or wherever."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Take the train out with Mom so we can go out with Maggie and Mark."

"OK. What are you doing tonight?"

"Homework. You?"

"The same. I wish we could do it together!"

"Me, too, but as we've said, this is way better than when you were in Cincinnati!"

"True! I love you, Matt!"

"I love you, too!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Ashley

"When you finish your Master's degree, what will you do?" I asked Yuriko as we worked together to make dinner.

"Help my grandfather, and other farmers, improve their efficiency by adopting modern technology to traditional Japanese methods."

"To retain the «kami», right?"

"Very good, Ashley-chan! Did your father teach you about that?"

"Yes, both here at home and at the dojo. Dad says America is losing its «kami» and that's what is causing the problems with society."

"Your dad is a very wise man!"

"Most of the time!" I agreed. "But men are just boys in bigger bodies with more money!"

"Now you sound like Birgit!"

"It was Liz who said that, I think, and she's not wrong!"

"I think, very soon, you may have a different opinion!"

I giggled, "You mean puberty? I already know all about boys and girls, and I like boys, it's just they can be dumb at times."

"And girls?"

"My eldest sister isn't exactly known for her wisdom!" I giggled.

"And you never do anything foolish or unwise?"

"Nope!" I declared with a huge smile. "I'm the picture of wisdom and maturity!"

"And very modest, too!"

"I am an Adams, and my mom is a trauma surgeon, so I come by it honestly!"

Yuriko laughed, "And yet, you also know how to be subtle, demure, and discreet, when appropriate."

"Also not my sister's strong suits!"

"But she is learning. How is school going?"

"School is pretty easy."

"You're in which grade?"

"Sixth. What should I do next?"

"Chop the cucumbers for the salad, please."

"OK," I agreed.



September 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I need you to sign some documents," Elyse said, coming into my office on Friday afternoon.

"What?" I asked.

"Acknowledgment of the receipt of the notices from the IRS and SEC, appointing McCarthy / Jenkins as our legal council for this matter, and authorizing Liz and me to lead the NIKA team."

"This can't wait for Stephanie to return?"

"You'd have to sign anyway, as president of the corporation."

"OK. Anything special I need to know about these documents?"

"Not beyond what I just said. This isn't responsive in any way."

She handed me the documents, and I signed them, then handed them back.

"Liz will issue a record preservation directive later today. It really won't affect anything, as we don't destroy any records with regard to taxes for ten years, and we've never destroyed any ESOP-related documents."

"OK. What did McCarthy/Jenkins say about the risks?"

"That it's too early to assess them. Liz and I did have an off-the-record chat with a compliance officer at Spurgeon, and he speculated the tax treatment of the ESOP and the regulations about closely held corporations. We don't think they'll find anything, but you know how that goes."

"They will find *something*," I replied. "We both know that. The only question is what they do about it. You also know the real trap, right?"

"Charges for making a materially false statement, even if inadvertently. And that's why we let the lawyers do all the talking."

"That's the one, and yes, that's why we let the lawyers talk to them. That said, they can use anything we commit to paper as well, if they decide it was an 'artifice' to covering up a crime. Anyway, this is Stephanie's challenge when she's back a week from Monday, and she has plenty of experience with these kinds of 'Imperial Entanglements' from her time at Spurgeon. Out of curiosity, when do we expect the 'swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance'?"

"It'll be a few weeks, most likely, and the SEC will begin by asking for records before they show up. The IRS shows up first and then begins asking for things."

"OK. On Monday, Penny and I start on the next version of NIKA Legal."

"And you're loving every minute! Sorry I had to bring you back into Ops."

"If it's not one thing, it's another. I assume you spoke to Joyce?"

"Yes. She filled in the rest of the Board."

"Good."

Elyse left, and I went back to work.

 Birgit

"Who's the lucky girl tonight?" I asked Jesse as we walked towards Giordano's.

"Nobody," he replied.

"That's quite the change from last year!"

"You know CeCe is at Arizona State, and Angelina became upset with me when I wouldn't be exclusive."

"It's just weird because last year you had the «Filles du jour». What about the cheerleaders?"

"They have football games on Friday nights, so they can't go out with us until after the season ends in December."

"So nobody?" I asked.

"I didn't say I wasn't getting laid," I chuckled. "Just not every day! Is your new friend still joining us?"

"You mean Philip? Yes. If you meant Bob, I'm seeing him tomorrow. He's going to take 'candid shots' of me in my 'natural habitat'!"

"Uh-oh!" Jesse chuckled.

"Not those kinds of pictures! We learned our lesson about that! We didn't realize just how much trouble everyone could be in. And I'm not sure taking a camera into the sauna is a good idea. The steam would totally mess it up."

"I saw a magazine layout that was done before we were born shot in the sauna, but Dad said they faked it by sitting with towels in the cool sauna with water sprayed on their faces from a squirt bottle."

"I saw that magazine. That's the one that Rachel's mom helped with, right?"

"Yes. She was the photographer's assistant. That's when she first met Dad. What is Bob going to take pictures of?"

"Me!" I giggled. "He'll take some when I'm running with Dad, at the dojo, and around the house."

"Does Peter know Philip is joining us tonight?"

"Yes. I told him yesterday. We're not a couple, so it's not like he has any say."

"That's true, but as Dad says, sex changes people, and how to they relate to each other. He might be hurt by you flirting with Philip or whatever."

"Except I can't because he's twenty, and if someone who knew I was under seventeen saw that, he could be in deep shit."

"Society needs to butt out!" Jesse declared. "The same would be true about Scarlett."

"But nobody *ever* goes after the girl when the guy is younger!" I groused. "But if a younger girl goes with an older guy, suddenly they want to lock the guy in prison even if she went after him!"

"Look at it this way," Jesse said, "in less than three years, it won't matter and nobody can do anything about it at that point."

"I know, but it's still dumb that I can't decide for myself. Heck, you can't decide for yourself, and you're sixteen and will be seventeen in February!"

"Can I ask you a totally private question, Sis?"

"Sure. What?"

"Mikail?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"A guess based on how you were acting. Does anyone else know?"

"Ashley, because she covered for me, so nobody knew I disappeared with Mikail for a few hours."

"That little sneak knows everything about everyone!"

I laughed, "Because she's quiet and circumspect, things nobody would ever say about you and me!"

"Hi, Jesse!" Brooke called out as we waited for the light so we could cross Hyde Park Avenue.

"Hi," he said back.

She walked over to us and looped her arm around Jesse's and I was positive he was going to get laid later, if he wanted!

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

Chelsea borrowed Mom's car and drove Maggie, Mark, and me to Gario's for pizza. We were seated right away, and placed our order, because deep dish took forty minutes to bake.

"How are things at home, Maggie?" Chelsea asked.

"A bit better. Matt's mom has been awesome in talking my parents off the ledge."

"Are your parents OK, Mark? Chelsea asked.

"Yes. I'm not in drama, so I don't have the same problems Maggie has. My parents aren't as libertine as Matt's parents and Eduardo, but my parents aren't worried about Maggie corrupting me!"

"In your dreams!" Maggie declared, causing all of us to laugh.

"My parents and Eduardo aren't really libertine," I replied. "They just acknowledge that I'm a young adult and respect my choices. Trust me, they wouldn't respect me doing lines of coke on the dining room table or robbing a liquor store!"

"But hosting an orgy?" Maggie asked with a smirk.

"First of all, I wouldn't. Second, they'd be concerned about peer pressure and consent, in addition to STI tests, birth control, and the potential legal

ramifications because I'm underage. People mistake respecting my choices and treating me as a young adult for being libertine. If you had the same freedom, you'd be exactly who you are. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because nothing your parents can say or do can prevent you from doing anything you feel is right with regard to your life. They might make things more difficult, or delay things a bit, but they can't prevent them."

"Being in drama?"

"For the short term? Sure. When you go to college? No. But you know what I was referring to, in context."

"That even without my parents control, I'd wait for my wedding night."

"Yes, and if you, for some reason, changed your mind on that, which I would never expect, there is literally nothing they can do to stop you. Well, nothing that wouldn't have them arrested and jailed. But you don't do it because you don't believe it's correct, not because your parents tell you not to do it."

"But doesn't she believe that because of what she was taught?" Chelsea asked.

"That certainly influenced her thinking, but Maggie, despite being a girl, is capable of independent thought!"

"Hey!" Maggie and Chelsea both protested while Mark laughed.

"You know I'm teasing," I said. "I mean about the 'despite being a girl' part!"

"Of course we know!" Chelsea declared. "But we had to object!"

"Matt's like the most feminist guy we know!" Maggie said. "So him teasing is OK."

"Thanks," I said.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"We have two choices for a movie," Freddy said. "Well, plus we could go back to Jesse's house. There's *Sweet Home Alabama*, a comedy with Reese Witherspoon, and *The Tuxedo*, an action movie with Jackie Chan."

"Jackie Chan, for sure, Mitch said."

"I agree," Nicholas added.

"I can go for the Jackie Chan flick," Libby said.

"Jackie Chan is cool," Philip agreed.

I knew I would rather see the Reese Witherspoon movie, but I wasn't sure any of the guys would enjoy it.

"I'm OK with it," I said.

Nobody objected, so that's what we decided to do. We all pitched in to pay the check, then left the restaurant to head for the Metra Electric train which would take us to the Loop. I had considered declining to go to the movie and taking Philip back to the house, but I thought about what Yuriko would advise, and decided it was best to see the movie that Philip wanted to see. In my mind, the

only way things could go where I thought I wanted them to go was if I played things totally cool and waited for him to become comfortable with the idea.

Of course, I wasn't going to wait forever, but I could be patient. I nearly laughed out loud at the idea of being patient, because that had never, ever been my strong suit. Nor had being circumspect or subtle, as Jesse and I had discussed earlier. With Philip, it was necessary, but with Bob, I didn't think it would be, because he'd already been flirting.

Part of it, I was sure, that we were close in age, while Philip was fixated on the six-year age difference. But also, it seemed that Bob had at least some experience with his two neighbors, while if Katy was right, Philip might have none at all. Having considered everything I knew about him, I had a sneaking suspicion that Katy was correct, and that would add to his reluctance.

When we arrived at the theater, I pushed those thoughts out of my mind and focused on enjoying the movie. It turned out to be pretty good, with Jackie Chan discovering his boss' tuxedo conferred super powers. There was enough comedy to go with the action that it was a really fun movie all around.

"I think I should just take the L back to IIT from the Loop," Philip said when we left the theater. "Otherwise I have a long walk to the L."

"OK," I agreed. "That makes sense."

The gang walked to the L first, and I debated if I should kiss Philip on the cheek, and decided it was a bad idea.

"See you next weekend?" I asked.

"Yes," he agreed. "I'll call you, OK?"

"Yes."

We said 'good night' and he went onto the platform, while the rest of us headed for Metra Electric.

 Jesse

"I don't have to be home until 1:00am," Brooke said when we got off the train in Kenwood. "So long as I'm at your house and you can drive me home."

"I'm sure I can do that, I just need to verify with my dad that I can use the car. Let me quick call him."

I did and as I expected, he agreed I could use his BMW to drive Brooke home.

"All set," I said. "We'll have about ninety minutes to integrate and shower before we have to leave for your house to make sure you're in by your curfew."

"That will tide me over until Wednesday!" Brooke declared. "Are you seeing anyone else?"

"Not regularly," I replied.

"Is it OK to ask what happened with Angelina?"

"She wanted to be exclusive, and you know that's not me, at least not now."

"We're too young to be tied down that way! Especially when we're going to college. It's supposed to be fun, in addition to getting our degrees! We can worry about marrying and kids after!"

"I agree, though if I were to meet someone my Junior Year in college, or connect with someone I already know who was interested, I'd consider it."

"Did you break things off with Angelina or did she break things off with you?"

"I think it's better to say it was mutual, based on differing views of the next two years."

"Well, I'd be very happy to integrate with you on a weekly basis for the next two years!"

"Sounds like a formula for mutual satisfaction!"

"Indubitably!"

I laughed at the *Flintstones* reference, took her hand, and led her into the house. My moms both smirked and rolled their eyes, but I ignored them, and Brooke and I went upstairs to my room to 'have some really serious sex'!

XXVIII. Clothing Optional

September 28, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Do you have a usual routine and route?" Bob asked when we stood on the porch waiting for Dad and Suzanne, who had just returned from walking Mom to work. My mom had been with them, but she didn't run with us.

"We stretch for a few minutes here, then we head to Washington Park and run a circuit there, then walk home to cool down."

"I think I'll go to the park and wait so I don't have to run to keep up with you! That's def not my strong suit!"

"It's so easy a girl can do it!" I teased.

"Uh huh," Bob replied. "I'll see you at the park!"

He left the porch and began walking towards the park, and a minute later, Dad and Suzanne came out of the house.

"Where's your friend?" Suzanne asked.

"He decided he wouldn't be able to keep up with us, so he's walking to Washington Park and he'll take pictures there."

"Then let's stretch," Dad said.

We did our stretching exercises then set off at a slow pace towards the park, as the cement sidewalks could put a serious strain on our shins, even with good running shoes, which we all had. When we approached the park, I saw Bob with the camera to his face, taking pictures as we jogged towards him. He moved strategically as we ran so he could take additional shots, then headed back to the house to wait for us to complete our full five-kilometer run.

Bob was waiting on the porch and took some photos as we approached at a brisk walk. We did some final stretching to cool down, then went into the house. I was tempted to tease Bob about showering with me, but without knowing if he'd had an STI test, I didn't want to get into an awkward situation where I offered something that couldn't actually happen.

"I need to shower," I said. "I'll be back down in about ten minutes."

"What?" Bob smirked. "No candid pictures?"

Dad, Suzanne, and I all laughed.

"Only if you want to get arrested," Dad said. "I wouldn't advise it."

"You can wait in the sunroom," I said, pointing.

Bob nodded and walked to the sunroom while Dad, Suzanne, and I all went upstairs so we could take showers. I envied Suzanne, because I was sure she and Dad would shower together. I showered quickly and was downstairs before Dad.

"I noticed that you believed me when I said my dad was totally cool, right?"

"Hey, if he can have three wives, two regular girlfriends, and assorted others, I wasn't *too* worried."

"Dad is totally cool."

"What's next?"

"I get my morning cuddles with Dad, we have breakfast, then we chill until it's time to go to the dojo."

"OK to shoot pictures while you're cuddling?"

"I'm OK with it, though you'll need to ask Dad if he is."

"He's your dad!" Bob protested.

"And it's your camera!" I declared.

"Fine," Bob declared, rolling his eyes as Dad came into the sunroom.

"Mr. Adams, is it OK to take a shot or two of you and Birgit cuddling? She's OK with it, but said I needed to ask you."

"Yes, of course," Dad replied.

Dad got into the chaise and I got in with him, but I decided to cuddle on the opposite side from what I usually did so that I was facing Bob.

"Making sure Bob gets your 'good' side?" Dad asked.

"Every side is my good side!" I declared.

"Whatever you say, Pumpkin!"

"If only!" I giggled.

"Is she always like this?" Bob asked.

"This is tame," Dad declared. "She's usually *worse!*"

"Hey!" I protested.

Bob snapped several pictures and then set his camera aside. He sat quietly while I cuddled Dad, but we couldn't have our usual talk because I had to be careful about what I said in front of Bob, even though at this point, he knew quite a bit about our family. When Mom called us for breakfast, I got my usual extra three minutes of cuddling.

"Dad, are you going to Jesse's game today?" I asked as we went to the kitchen for breakfast.

"No. Pete is in goal today, and Nicholas isn't playing, so Jesse and I discussed it and he agreed it was OK for me to go to karate today."

"Could we spar, then?" I asked.

"If you want to land on your butt!" Ashley smirked.

"Did anyone ask you?" I said, looking daggers at her.

"No! But that never stops YOU from commenting!"

"Eldest sister privilege!" I declared. "And eldest in the house!"

"And someone who is getting awfully big for their britches!" Mom said.

"Her butt IS getting bigger," Ashley smirked.

"EXCUSE ME!" I objected. "It's the cutest butt in this house!"

"I've seen better," Dad said, smirking.

"HEY!" I protested.

"Mrs. Adams, do you have any suggestions for dealing with a snippy blonde?" Bob asked.

"Well, it takes one to know one," Suzanne offered.

"Sexy college pussy does NOT give you a pass, Suzy-Q!" Mom said, causing everyone to laugh.

"Is it always like this?" Bob asked.

"Yes," Yuriko said. "They are very irreverent. Especially the 'eldest daughter!'"

"HEY!" I protested.

"I think that was a compliment," Dad said.

"I'm still looking for advice here," Bob declared.

I narrowed my eyes, staring at him.

"Dark suit, red tie, and a satin interior for the coffin," Dad said.

"I don't think so," Bob replied. "A simple plaque is all I would need, because I'm afraid they'd never find my body!"

 Jesse

"Any last minute advice?" Pete asked as we waited for coach to give us our final pep talk before our game against Brother Rice.

"Same as always. Trust your defensemen, don't go down into the butterfly too quickly, and keep your stick on the ice to guard the five hole."

"Good advice, Block," Coach said. "Glad you've finally begun to follow it!"

"Hockey camp was well worth it," I replied.

Both for hockey AND for meeting Scarlett, though I could have done without the rapist roommate.

"Men, the only thing I have to say is to stick to our game plan, stick to your zones and watch the passing lanes. Pete is in goal today, and we're short one player. Nicholas is here, but he can't dress for the game. That means we'll run three lines as we practiced, with Jim moving up from O4 to O3, and Teddy and Gene rotating into other lines. Pay attention to my calls so we don't have a 'Too Many Men' penalty. Jesse will help me with keeping playing time equal. Let's get 'em!"

"RAH!" everyone shouted back.

We headed out of the locker room to the ice, and Pete and I swapped roles, with me standing in goal for the initial warm-up shots, and Pete taking the final ones. That left it to me to collect the pucks when the horn sounded, so I did that, then skated to the bench. It was always strange to sit on the bench during a game, but I knew it was good for Pete to get some in-game experience, as he'd need it if I were ever sick or hurt, or something unavoidable came up. He'd also be the starter his Senior year, if things worked out the way they usually did.

I picked up the clipboard with the form we used to track shifts and marked an 'X' in a box following each of the players on the ice for the initial face-off, and when they came off the ice, the number of seconds they had played. It was a LOT of work, but it was very helpful for coach and for us to review stats, because I also recorded shots on goal and goals. I had a serious appreciation for the work Jerry had done when I was a Freshman, and Pete had done since then.

The game started out well, with our team maintaining control of the puck for most of the first ten minutes, but we couldn't get a puck past the Brother Rice goalie. That changed when Freddy stole a puck with eight minutes to go in the first period, skated in on the goalie, got him down, then flipped the puck over the goalie's stick-side shoulder. That broke the dam, unleashing our offense, and it was 4-0 by the time the horn sounded to end the first period.

 Birgit

At the dojo, Bob shot an entire roll of film during warm-ups and practice, and about ten minutes before the end of our session, «Shihan» Will allowed Dad and me to spar. We put on our protective gear and moved to the center of the training room, with Miyu acting as referee.

Dad was taller, so he had a longer reach, but I had been sparring regularly for years, while he hadn't been allowed by the doctors to spar. I'd also been working with Miyu and Sensei Will on techniques to minimize the reach advantage taller people had, so I felt I had a reasonable chance against Dad. We took our positions opposite each other, bowed to Miyu and bowed to each other.

Bob was taking pictures, but I had to put that out of my mind and concentrate, or Dad would win easily, though if he pinned me to the floor...I pushed *that* thought out of my mind as well, as that distraction would cause me to lose quicker than thinking about Bob and his camera!

"Ready? Begin!" Miyu declared.

I decided my best chance was to surprise Dad, so I tried a triple strike attack and connected both the second and third.

"Nice moves, Pumpkin," Dad said.

Oh, I'd show him some moves if he let me, I thought, then shoved that thought out of my head before I lost my focus. I also had to be careful not to let Dad sweep my legs, or get close enough to grapple, as he'd win if either of those happened. I attacked again, but this time Dad blocked all three strikes and I just barely escaped a counter-strike. We went back-and-forth trading blocked strikes, and I tried to think of some way to get past Dad's reach and his good defense.

Miyu called time, so we had a one-minute break before the next three-minute round. I knew that every minute Dad sparred, his skills would improve because he was very good, just rusty. And that meant the second round would be more challenging than the first, and the third more challenging than the second.

My thinking proved correct when Dad easily fended off my attacks in the second round and scored twice. The third round wasn't even close, and he managed to grapple and take me down to the mat, his body across mine. I wanted to stay there, but I knew that would cause no end of problems for both of us, so I reluctantly shoved him so he'd move.

"Sensei Steve wins by takedown," Miyu declared.

I narrowed my eyes at Dad, and he just laughed. We bowed and then lined up for our cooldown stretches. Once those were complete, Mom, Dad, Suzanne, my sisters, Bob, and I all headed back to the house. I took my second shower of the day, and then we all went to the kitchen for lunch.

 Jesse

Playing one man short, and with our backup goalie, hadn't hurt us at all, and we easily won 7-1. British International was going to be a more difficult game, but if things went according to plan, we'd have Nicholas back, and I'd be in goal. Of course, with Loki always lurking about, things didn't always go to plan!

"Great game, Men!" Coach Nelson said once we returned to the locker room after the usual handshakes at center ice. "Next week, we have a tougher game against British International, which I know seems strange, given I can't name a single NHL player from Great Britain!"

We all laughed.

"I'll see you all bright and early Monday morning! You can hit the showers!"

I showered, dressed, and then met my moms, Libby, and Lilibeth so we could head home.

"Thanks for coming to the game," I said. "I know it's not as exciting when I don't play!"

"My heart could use the break," Mom Two said.

"Hardy-har-har," I deadpanned.

"What are you doing this afternoon, Jesse?" Libby asked.

"Ebele is coming over around 1:00pm," I replied.

"Oh, OK," Libby replied with a knowing smile.

"Just to hang out," I said.

"Uh huh," Libby smirked. "Lilibeth and I will find something to do!"

"Have lunch and hang out," I replied. "It'll be OK."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

When we arrived home, I put my gear on the racks in the drying room, set the controls on the dehumidifier, sprayed everything with Febreze, then headed upstairs to have lunch with my moms, Libby, and Lilibeth. We ate lunch, I helped clean up, finishing just before Ebele arrived.

"I hope you don't mind we crashed your afternoon," Libby said to Ebele.

"It's OK. We were just hanging out."

"Let's go to the main house," I suggested. "We can play pool or ping-pong."

"How about ping-pong?" Libby suggested.

We all agreed, so we headed to the basement of the main house.

 Birgit

"Now what?" I asked Bob once we finished eating lunch.

"Are we allowed to shoot photos in your room?"

I almost said that we'd be allowed to *fuck* in my room, but I wasn't sure that's what I wanted with Bob. It was strange because I liked him and he was nice looking. He was a bit out of shape, but that wasn't a turnoff because he wasn't fat.

"Yes, I'm allowed to have anyone I want in my room. Right now, my cousin Patricia is sharing my room because her mom is on her honeymoon, but otherwise, I have my own room."

"Her mom is divorced and remarried?"

"Yes. Her mom is my dad's little sister. She's in Monte Carlo on her honeymoon. Shall we go upstairs? If Patty is there, I can ask her to leave."

"How old is she?"

"Six. Her brother, David, is eight, and he's staying in my brother Albert's room."

We went upstairs, and I saw that Patty was with Ashley and Stephe, which meant I didn't need to ask her to give Bob and me privacy. Bob took a number of shots of me sitting at my computer, and then some of me standing in front of my full-length mirror. Once he finished, I gave him a tour of the rest of the house, ending in the basement where Jesse, Libby, Lilibeth, and a pretty black girl were playing ping-pong on the table that fit on top of the pool table.

"And this," I said, opening the door, "is our sauna."

"I've never been in a sauna before."

"We could, if you wanted, though you probably don't want your camera in the steam."

"That would wreck it, for sure. But it doesn't matter because I don't have a bathing suit."

"You don't need one!"

"Then what would I wear?"

"Nothing!"

"And you'll wear yours?"

"No, I almost never wear a suit in the sauna; only when someone isn't comfortable with everyone being naked, which is what I usually do."

"Naked. With guys?"

"I'm not ashamed of my body, and any guys who were invited wouldn't stare. And if someone did, that would be the last time they were invited."

"Has that ever happened?"

"Just once I'm aware of with someone Jesse invited."

"Hang on a sec. You've been in the sauna, naked, with your brother?"

I had to consider how much I trusted Bob, and if I thought he could handle the circus at the Compound. He seemed cool, and so far he'd more or less taken everything in stride without freaking out, including my dad's unique set of relationships.

"With the whole family," I replied. "Though my younger sisters have taken to wearing bathing suits, which is pretty normal for girls in Europe from ages twelve to eighteen."

"What does Europe have to do with a sauna in your basement?"

"Dad is more in tune with European ideas on nudity and sex. He was an exchange student in Sweden about twenty years ago, and that's where he began formulating his ideas. I was there over the Summer on vacation, and I'm going to be an exchange student for my Junior year in High School, the same as Dad was."

"That's cool! What about your friends?"

"Mostly," I replied. "But some parents want their kids to wear bathing suits, so we accommodate that, as I said. Dad's rule is that if even one person objects, we all have to wear bathing suits or wrap towels around ourselves."

"Just out of curiosity, where do you change?"

"Sometimes we just strip off our clothes right here and go in, other times in one of the guest rooms or the bathroom. There are robes in the closet along with towels, so if you don't want to parade through the house naked, you can do that. And, to answer your next question, yes, I could, and would, walk up to my room naked and nobody would say a word."

"What about your brother and his friends?"

I laughed, "Libby, Lilibeth, and I have all been in the sauna together with Jesse. I don't know about the black girl, though, as she's new."

"I have to ask," Bob said with a goofy smile, "but is there anything normal about your family?"

"No! But *we* aren't the problem, society is! Too many hangups, too much concern about what other people are doing, and too scared to take any risks."

"I take back my question," Bob said. "It's not about being 'normal' but 'conformist'. Those words don't mean the same thing."

"No kidding! What we do is *normal*, it's society that's fucked up! And the word 'normal' has negative connotations. What we do is not *typical*, but there's nothing abnormal about it. We aren't the ones with hangups or who freak out because somebody does something different from how we do it. It's all about respecting each other, which society doesn't do despite claiming to do so."

"I hadn't exactly thought about it that way, and I'm getting the impression there's more to life here at your house than you've let on."

"Things at the Compound are very different, and you'll find that our approach to life is much healthier. We all respect each other, we all love each other, and nobody will interfere with how we each choose to live our lives, so long as we continue to respect each other and contribute to the family by doing chores, helping each other when needed, and sticking together as a family."

"How far does that freedom go?" Bob asked.

"Far enough that we could go up to my room and go to bed and nobody would say a word."

"Is that an offer?" Bob asked with a smirk.

"Have you had an STI test recently?"

"No, but things haven't, uhm, gone that far with Meghan or Mariana."

"It's possible to contract an STI, including hepatitis, without having intercourse. My parents only have two rules -- reliable birth control and a clean STI test. Beyond that, it's the most personal decision anyone can make and therefore only the person can decide for themselves."

"I'd say you were yanking my chain, but I get the impression you're serious about everything you've said in the past ten minutes."

"That's because I am."

"And you'd really go to bed with me?"

"The only way to find out the answer to that question is to get an STI test and then ask!"

"Just like that?"

"Get your test, then ask me if I want to fuck. I'll give you an immediate answer."

"Why do I feel as if I walked into an episode of that old TV show, *Candid Camera*?"

"More like *The Twilight Zone*," I giggled. "*There is a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call The Twilight Zone, or the Compound!*"

Bob laughed, "You memorized Rod Serling's monologue!"

"We quote movies quite often here," I replied. "Dad calls it 'Darmok' because usually it's a short quote that applies as analogy, metaphor, or simile to something we're discussing. That episode of *TNG* was about communicating by metaphor."

"I know I have no right to ask this question, and you can tell me so, but what you said before implies that you've done it."

"I have," I replied. "I feel no need to keep that a secret except from busybodies who think they have a right to tell me what I'm allowed to do with my own body!"

"I wouldn't mind taking some sexy pictures, if you're game."

"Sure. But we have to be careful because I'm under eighteen."

"Not THOSE kind!" Bob said, shaking his head. "I meant clothed!"

"Oh," I giggled.

"You're goofy, Birgit!"

"I am! Let's go get some cookies and lemonade!"

 Jesse

We finished our fourth game of ping-pong, with Ebele and me winning three out of the four, and I asked what the girls wanted to do.

"Sauna?" Libby asked. "It's been months since I was last in there."

"We could, though I'm not sure what Lilibeth and Ebele think."

"Birgit told me about the saunas!" Lilibeth declared.

"And I heard about the softball team from last year!" Ebele added.

"Bathing suits or towels are an option," I said. "And I have to ask both Lilibeth and Ebele what their parents would think. After the softball team was here, Dad changed the rules to require parental approval for mixed-sex groups for anyone under eighteen."

"Seriously?" Libby asked.

"A group of irate dads came to the house to complain. Dad managed to talk two of them off the ledge, and they come to Guys' Night, but given the suspensions at school and the risk to the hockey team, Dad felt he had to put the new rule in place."

"Well, I can tell you what my dad would say!" Ebele declared. "And it wouldn't be 'yes'! It would be 'Hell no!'."

"I'm not quite sure how my parents would react," Lilibeth said. "They're typical Boston Irish. That means they're generally socially conservative and politically moderate, though slightly left of center."

"I never asked my parents," Libby said. "And I've done it before."

"I know," I replied. "But with a group, each person has to have permission from their parents."

"But one-on-one?" Libby asked.

"So long as both people are discreet, then it's a judgment call on my part which dad will back."

"None of the four of us would say anything," Libby protested. "You know that."

I didn't know that because I didn't know Ebele well enough to know for sure. I knew Lilibeth was discreet because her parents had no idea she was lesbian and was dating Libby, rather than just hanging out as friends.

"I'm not sure I could do that," Lilibeth said, "even if my parents gave permission. I mean, if it were just girls, I might, but Jesse's a guy!"

"No kidding!" Libby exclaimed. "But honestly, it's not about sex."

"I'm positive my parents would not see it that way!" Ebele declared.

"If we use the sauna, it has to be bathing suits or wrapped in towels," I said.

"Both due to my dad's rules and to respect Ebele's views."

"Why don't we go for ice cream," Lilibeth suggested. "I don't think anyone will object to that!"

"Just my jeans!" Libby declared."

[Indianapolis, Indiana]

 Matthew

"What did you want to do this afternoon?" I asked Chelsea after lunch.

"How about the swimming pool?"

"That works for me," I replied.

I let Eduardo know we were going to the pool, then Chelsea and I went back to our room to change into our bathing suits.

"Sexy!" I declared, seeing Chelsea in her modest one-piece.

"I thought about the bikini I wore in Spain, but decided people in Indianapolis might lose their minds!"

I laughed.

"Especially if you wore it the same way!"

"I was surprised at how easy it was! I was nervous thinking about it, but then I just took my top off and it was great. No staring or drooling or anything like would happen here."

"But you were noticed!" I declared. "And not just by me!"

"That doesn't bother you at all?"

"Why should it? I know you love me. And you know what my family believes about nudity."

"Would you go to a nude beach?"

"Sure. It's not all that different from being in the sauna with a group of people."

"But strangers?"

"You yourself said it was easy to go topless in Spain. I'm not self-conscious and neither are you. Enough people have seen me naked and I've seen enough people naked that it's just not a big deal. For some people, it is, though, and that's OK."

"Maggie?"

"I wasn't specifically thinking about her, but yes, because her idea of modesty means covering her body in front of anyone except her husband, or in limited circumstances, for medical care. Remember, it's her body, and she decides, just as you decide about yours and I decide about mine. Maggie doesn't try to tell anyone else what to do, she just follows her own moral code and ideas on modesty."

"Mark?"

I laughed, "OK, she does tell HIM what to do, but that's not what I meant!"

"Do you feel as if I tell you what to do?"

"Not in the way the question implies. I want you to tell me what you want, what you like, what you don't like, and how you would prefer I act. It's up to me to decide to do it or not. But we're in a relationship, so that's very different from, say, the typical conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical Christian who wants to impose their views on society.

"With you and me, or Maggie and Mark, it's voluntary. Maggie is serious about her faith, but she also accepts that not everyone agrees with her. So, unlike some people in her church, she wouldn't object to a 'clothing optional' beach, she'd just decline to go because of her views on modesty. If she were in Spain, she'd keep her top on, if she even wore a bikini, which I doubt she would."

"Out of curiosity..."

"I don't think of Maggie that way out of respect for her."

"But you can't help thinking about things like that!" Chelsea protested.

"Not true," I countered. "Maggie is my best female friend besides you, and there is literally nothing sexual between us, and never has been, in thought or action."

"I think she thinks about you that way," Chelsea observed.

I shrugged, "We were talking about me. I can only be accountable for me, not for anyone else. Well, you and our kids, but even that's a bit different. In the end, it doesn't matter what Maggie thinks or what she does. What matters is what I think and what I do. And except for when you bring it up, I don't ever even think about Maggie in that way."

"Sorry," Chelsea said softly.

"In one sense, the questions are legit, but in another sense, they're out of left field. Maybe if I were a typical guy with no track record, but I'm not. We discussed this before, but I am yours and you have nothing to worry about. Maggie and I are friends, that's all it is, and that's all it will ever be."

"Sorry," Chelsea said again.

"You obviously aren't comfortable with my friendship with her."

"Sorry," Chelsea said again. "Let's just go to the pool."

"I don't want you to be unhappy," I said. "But I'm not sure what you need me to do to make you happy."

"Just love me, Matt."

"You know I do."

She grabbed my hand, and we left the room and headed for the pool.



September 29, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I want to go to New York next month to see Marcella," I said.

"What about her parents?" Dad asked.

"They're going to be out of town for a long weekend. I checked with Colonel Anisimov and she said it would be OK to stay with her. I also checked on airfares, and so long as I book my flight tomorrow, I can get a decent price."

"You know my concern, Pumpkin."

"I know, but I feel Marcella really needs a friend like me, and it's difficult for us to talk on the phone and we can't use the computer because her dad put spyware on it to see everything she does."

"You understand what might happen if her parents were to find out, right?"

"She'd be in big trouble, but isn't it up to her to decide if the reward outweighs the risk?"

"And you're the reward?" Dad teased.

I laughed, "Of course I am!"

"Uh huh!"

"You could find out!" I teased. "I wouldn't mind being pinned..."

Dad laughed, "I don't think 'mind' is the correct term!"

"OK," I giggled, "I *want* to be pinned! And you have the pin!"

"Cute. But back to the topic had at hand."

"It's not *in* my hand!" I teased. "But back to Marcella, I think she really needs someone to talk to and I've heard from someone in this house about how intimate a good conversation can be."

"I'll leave it up to you," Dad said. "Just consider the possible outcomes."

"I know, but I think she needs someone like me. I mean someone open-minded and sympathetic, not the way that smirk you're making implies!"

"Says the young woman who made this conversation about sex!"

"So sue me!" I giggled. "Anyway, unless you say 'no', I'll fly out on the evening of the 11th, which is a Friday, and back on Monday evening, which is Columbus Day."

"Did you ask your mom about this?"

"No, but I did chat with Katy, and had the same basic talk you and I are having right now. Katy is sympathetic to Marcella's situation because it's not all that

different from when she was growing up, or even now, with how her parents treat her."

"See what your mom says, but I have no objections."

"Does that mean I get to decide? Or does mom get to decide?"

"You get to decide, Pumpkin. But you should listen to your mom's advice. She's not the Wicked Witch of the West."

"I know," I replied. "It's just your advice is the best!"

"Even if that's true, you still should seek out other opinions. A diversity of opinion is the key to maximizing the possible solutions to any challenges we face. Slightly changing subjects, with Bob here yesterday morning, I didn't get to ask how things went with Philip?"

"He's still freaked out by the fact that I'm fourteen, but Katy suggested that a *Dungeons & Dragons* playing member of the Society for Creative Anachronism is just nerdy enough to possibly be totally inexperienced with girls."

"It's possible," Dad replied. "If I hadn't met Melanie when I did, I might have been even more focused on computers."

"You discovered from her that girls were WAY more fun than computers!"

"Yes, and equally important, that there were plenty of girls available, if you knew where to look."

I laughed, "You never went looking! They all heard about you from their friends and chased you! Well, not my mom, who you had to chase!"

"She wanted to be caught," Dad chuckled. "All it took was one kiss!"

"I didn't even need the kiss!" I teased. "But I'm seeing Philip again on Friday. I'm being careful around him and not pushing things."

"Who are you, and what did you do with my daughter?" Dad asked.

"Well, I did tell Bob that if he had an STI test and asked me to fuck, I'd give him an immediate answer!"

"Do I even want to know the context of *that* statement?" Dad asked.

"About how you and my moms parent," I replied. "Just that I had the freedom to make decisions for myself, including that one."

"So it's more than just Photo Club buddies?"

"I only have fuck buddies, Dad! I'm not interested in a boyfriend! I want my freedom until it's time to marry and have kids, which is at least ten years from now, and probably closer to fifteen!"

"Does Peter know that?"

"Yes. I was totally clear with him, and he was out with us on Friday evening, so he met Philip. Trust me, Dad! Peter will be happy to continue being 'Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater!'"

"TMI!" Dad declared.

"Oh, please!" I responded, rolling my eyes.

"Just be wise, Pumpkin. And discuss New York with your mom."

"I will. I'll do that today before our Hangout, so I can buy the ticket tomorrow if I decide to go."

[Indianapolis, Indiana]

 Matthew

"I like these seats," I said to Eduardo. "A perfect view of the front stretch, and a really good view of the first three turns, and high enough to see almost every spot on the course."

"That's one advantage of this kind of circuit," Eduardo replied. "Unlike nearly every other F1 course, this one has seats which provide a good view of the whole race."

"Who do you like for the podium, Eduardo?" Michael asked.

"It's hard to bet against Schumacher and Barrichello," he replied. "For the third spot, probably Coulthard."

"Qualifying order?" Michael asked.

"Unless somebody has a mechanical problem or makes a huge error, P1, P2, P3 should finish that way."

"Barrichello hit the wall on Friday, according to the internet story I read," I said, "but they obviously fixed his car given he's in P2. I think Juan Pablo Montoya has a good chance given he's starting P4, and the other Schumacher brother is starting P5. The article also said there are no team orders for Ferrari, but I'm not sure that matters because Michael has the championship sewn up at this point."

About fifteen minutes later, after the formation lap, the cars were on the grid for the start. The green flag waved behind the grid, and then a few seconds later, the lights went out to start the race. Everyone made a clean start, though Ralf Schumacher got the jump on Montoya and passed him. When the two of them came around to complete the first lap, Schumacher slid into Montoya and damaged his own rear wing, requiring him to make a pit stop, while Montoya continued unscathed.

It was a clean race, with only four retirements, all for mechanical problems: Kimi Räikkönen, Alex Yoong, Mark Webber, and Pedro de la Rosa. Coming to the finish line, Michael Schumacher, who had the race totally under control, appeared to slow, and Barrichello barely beat him over the line to win the race, with Coulthard in third.

"What happened?" Michael asked.

"I have no idea!" Eduardo replied. "Schumacher slowed for some reason, though his car looks OK and sounded fine when it went by. Maybe there were team orders after all. That does give Barrichello seven more points than Montoya, so maybe that was it. Still it was strange, and it was so close to a dead heat, I can't really be sure what was going on."

"Weird," I observed.

"Shall we head back to the hotel, then go out for a nice steak dinner?" Eduardo inquired.

We all agreed, so we left our seats and began to make our way out of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Do you have some time to talk?" I asked Mom at lunch.

"Yes," Mom said. "If it's OK with your dad, let's take our lunch to the 'Indian' room. I know you have your Hangout this afternoon."

"It's OK with me," Dad said, which didn't surprise me given he'd suggested I speak with Mom.

Mom and I left the table and went to the 'Indian' room where we sat at the low table to eat and talk.

"I want to go to New York in two weeks to see my friend Marcella."

"Normally you'd ask your dad about that."

I felt it was better to keep Dad's advice confidential, including his advice that I speak to Mom.

"Yes, but this is different, and I want another perspective. I need to reveal a confidence, but I'm sure you'll keep it to yourself."

"Yes, I will," Mom promised.

I told her about meeting Marcella, about being discovered, and about how her parents had reacted. I knew Mom knew bits and pieces, but I told her everything I'd told Dad or Katy.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"It's a difficult situation," Mom said. "You know your grandfather didn't approve of your dad, and at one point, he tried to prevent us from seeing each other. He agreed, at least in some part, with your Grandma Adams about your dad."

I couldn't help but laugh and ask, "Was he wrong?"

"Well, no," Mom replied. "Though Grandma Adams called me a slut when I hadn't slept with anyone, including your dad."

"Grandma Adams is insane. Let's leave her out of this."

"Actually, I brought up her and my dad for a reason. I could also mention Carla and Carol, too."

"Ugh," I groaned. "Parents who are lunatics!"

"From our perspective, yes, that's true, but they are still parents, and Marcella isn't eighteen, just as Francesca and Rachel aren't, and neither was I. And that means they do have some say in the matter, even if we disagree with them. What do you think will happen if Marcella's parents were to find out?"

"Nothing good, that's for sure. But didn't you take a chance in seeing Dad when you knew your dad would object?"

"Yes, I did. But that was my decision, and I took responsibility for the outcome."

"Marcella invited me, Mom. I didn't ask her to invite me. She knows the risks but wants me to visit."

"Does she know you like boys?"

"Yes. She knows I've had sex with boys and that I prefer boys."

"You realize you could hurt her, right?"

"But couldn't I hurt anyone I have a relationship with if it doesn't go the way they want it to? I'm being completely honest with her."

"If that's the case, and she accepts and understands the risks, then it's up to you to decide what's best for you, and what's best for her, but what you want needs to be tempered by how it might affect her."

"She needs a friend and someone to talk to, and wants it to be me. I believe I can help her, if only with a friendly ear."

"It's your decision, Birgit, you just need to be sure you've thought things through and that it's the correct decision for Marcella and for you. You usually make good decisions. Make one now."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome."

XXIX. «Uphetsad»

September 30, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"The IRS auditors will be here tomorrow," Elyse said, coming into my office late on Monday morning. "Just two to start with, and they already sent me a list of records to produce."

"Anything out of the ordinary?"

"No. It was the standard set of requests -- financials, payables and receivable records, a list of shareholders, plan documents for the ESOP, profit sharing, and bonus plans, and salary and benefits information. I had Brenda and Brock set up a replica read-only copy of the financial and benefits databases on a VM they will be able to access via a segregated VLAN. They can run all the reports they want without tying up time for any of my staff. Sam reviewed the security as one of her last acts at NIKA."

"What about backup documentation?"

"We'll give them access to the DVDs with the scans. They can ask Iron Mountain for physical paper backup, but either I or Kelly have to sign off to make sure they aren't snooping where they aren't entitled."

"The IRS can pretty much ask for anything," I countered.

"Yes, but we want to know if they're going afield, and I'll confer with Liz and Phoebe from McCarthy/Jenkins before we produce anything we don't think is relevant."

"You know my take," I replied. "Open the kimono and don't try to hide anything, but I'll defer to Liz and Phoebe to advise you while Stephanie is away. When she's back next Monday, she can decide what she wants to do about any out of the ordinary requests. What about the SEC?"

"I'll send them a pair of boxes of copies of documents and DVDs today, all relating to the ESOP and the actual shareholders. They're certainly going to ask for details about SKJ once they see all the paperwork."

"I'm aware. When that happens, I'll turn it over to Jacob Goldberg and let him deal with it. He's the Registered Agent and everything needs to go through him, including questions about the general and limited partners."

"And you know they can pierce that just by asking, right?"

"Yes, of course, and I'm positive they'll decide to audit SKJ, and probably Patent Partners, and by extension, Kara, Jess, and me. More power to them, as we don't play any games and have zero to hide."

"I expect the IRS to review the purchase of Virtual Law Clerk."

I laughed, "Let them. It was completely by the book, agreed to by the trustee appointed by the Bankruptcy Court, and approved by the bankruptcy judge. Nobody challenged it, and we don't control enough of the market for any antitrust statutes to apply in any reasonable definition of the market."

"OK. I don't think we'll need you involved in anything. You might have to sign some declarations as President, but they'll all be things I've already reviewed and signed as CFO."

"OK. Just let me know."

"Will do. The Orr Room will be occupied for at least the next three weeks."

"I'll avoid the extension of the swamp like the plague!"

"Is it really true DC was built on a swamp?"

"There are marshlands, but no real swamp. And while it's true that George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and U.S. Grant all suffered from malaria at some point, it wasn't because DC was a 'malarial swamp'. Well, not climatologically, anyway. Malaria was a problem in the US until around 1950, and even since then, there have been outbreaks in marshy, mosquito-infested areas, but I believe all of those are because someone from a country where the disease is endemic visited and was bitten by a local mosquito."

"I knew you'd know. Anyway, I'll keep you posted about developments until Stephanie is back."

"Is Barbara up to speed?"

"Yes, and thankful she doesn't have to deal with it!"

"I bet!" I chuckled.

Elyse left, and I went back to work.

 Jesse

On Monday afternoon, Ebele and I walked to the diner so she could have her tutoring session. I would rather have done it at my house, but I totally understood her needing to be able to tell her dad that we weren't alone in my house together. It appeared, despite my earlier impressions from our first meeting, as well as other interactions before the previous week, that she wasn't actually interested in fooling around.

We worked on verb conjugations and vocabulary, similar to how Rachel had helped me, and I suggested strongly that Ebele create flashcards which she should carry in her purse so she could review them any time she had a few free minutes. She accepted the suggestion and promised to create the flashcards for vocabulary and verb conjugations before our next weekly session.

"I don't have to be home until 6:00pm for dinner," she said when we finished our hour-long session just after 4:00pm."

"Nobody is home at my house, though I'm sure my younger sisters, my brother, and most likely Suzanne, Yuriko, or Natalie are at my dad's house."

"I think that should be OK," Ebele said. "I don't plan to say anything except we had our tutoring session and I don't think they'll ask anything other than where we met."

"It's up to you," I replied.

"Could we play pool?"

"Sure," I agreed, and we left the diner to head for the Compound.

"Can I ask you something?" Ebele inquired when we turned onto Woodlawn Avenue.

"Sure."

"Why would Robin say you were a pervert?"

I sighed because she was completely out of line, and I couldn't really answer without violating her privacy. I could simply refuse to speak about it, but I felt that a rumor circulating about me being a 'pervert' could come back to haunt us some day, so I felt justified in answering.

"Honestly? I wanted to go down on her and she said it was 'gross' and 'perverted'."

"Well, I've never had that done, but the girls who have, say it feels awesome!"

"So the girls say! I wouldn't know!"

Ebele laughed softly, "Obviously! But I bet you, as with just about every guy on the planet, likes that done to you!"

"It's possible that's true," I replied with a grin.

"You're a goofball, Jesse!"

"I know! Life is much more fun that way!"

"I bet that's why she said that," Ebele observed. "I mean, why she thinks you going down on her is perverted. She thinks giving a blowjob is gross."

"And I can see that," I replied. "But I made it clear that reciprocation wasn't necessary because I like doing it and I think it tastes good."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I'm happy to demonstrate to an interested girl who's had an STI test."

"You can really get an STD from doing that?"

"Absolutely. Any exchange of bodily fluids can transmit an STI."

"Swapping spit?"

"Theoretically, yes, but it requires an open wound in your mouth, but that can be as little as having bitten your cheek or tongue. Did you read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*?"

"Yes, but it seemed far-fetched to me."

"It's not. I know the author, Bethany Krajack, isn't a medical doctor, but if you wanted to speak to my Aunt Jess, who is, she'll tell you. Bodily fluids, sharing needles, blood transfusions, and other possible ways. Mostly the blood supply in the US is safe now, but if you had a transfusion before they started screening, you could have contracted something. In other words, there are ways for a virgin to contract an STI without having what most people would call 'sex'."

"I think my dad would call a kiss 'having sex' to hear him tell it!"

Fathers of teenage girls generally have little tolerance for their daughters having any kind of intimate contact! Dad was the exception, and my sisters benefitted from that.

"Your dad seems cool. I bet your sisters don't have that problem."

"Not so long as they follow the rules of always using birth control and their partners having had STI tests. Those rules are inviolable, but if we follow them, then we're free to make our own decisions."

"How do you decide?" Ebele asked.

"Exactly as the book says -- you consider your spiritual and ethical values, your life goals, whether you're comfortable with the things you're thinking about doing, and your attraction to the person. If all of those point to doing it, and you and the person are on the same page about what it means, then you do it. If any of those things mean not doing it, then you don't."

"Do you think about doing that with me?"

"I'm a sixteen-year-old guy," I said with a grin. "I think about doing it with every pretty girl! But that doesn't mean I do, or even try."

"How do you decide?"

"First, I have to be attracted to her. Second, she has to not be involved with anyone I know in any way, or not steady with someone if I don't know them. Third, she has to understand I'm not interested in being exclusive with anyone at this point. Fourth, she has to be mature. Fifth, she has to have had an STI test. Sixth, we have to agree on birth control."

"What do you mean by mature?" Ebele asked.

"Well, to use an example from this conversation, thinking that oral sex is perverted. It's one thing to not want to do it, it's another thing to think it's perverted. Does that make sense?"

"You mean the difference between not liking it for some reason and thinking it's gross or disgusting?"

"You can even think it's gross," I replied. "Or not want to swallow, or even let the guy shoot in your mouth. But that's not the same thing as thinking it's perverted or deviant. There are things I would never do that I don't think are perverted or deviant."

"Such as?"

"Doing *anything* with another guy!" I exclaimed. "I have gay friends, and they do stuff with each other, and that's OK. I don't think it's perverted, it's just not something I would do."

"OK, that makes sense. I think I agree with you. I mean, I know about Libby and Lilibeth, and I would never do that, but I don't think they're perverts just because they like girls."

"Then we're basically on the same page."

"Thanks for answering my questions."

"You're welcome!"

 Steve

"Thank you for being part of the NIKA family for eleven years," I said to Sam when she joined me for tea late in the day.

"It really is a family," Sam replied. "And I have mixed emotions because you provided me with my dream job."

"Always with a goal to see you attain your goals, even if they ultimately lay outside of NIKA. You're moving on to the next phase of your life, and that's a good thing. I'm very happy we could do our part to help you make your vision for your future a reality."

"I can't imagine having worked for a better company, and I will miss it."

"Hopefully not right away! You should enjoy your excursion! And, when you choose an agency to volunteer with, let me know. If it's not one already on our matching donations list, I'll add it, and make my own substantial contribution."

"Thanks! If we were physicians or had any medical training, it would most likely be «Médecins Sans Frontières», but given our skill sets, a company involved in putting technology to use helping people live better lives makes more sense."

"And, in the end, having a 'well-lived life' and helping others do the same is a worthy goal."

"That's one of your goals, right?"

"Absolutely."

"I appreciate everything you've done for me."

"And I appreciate everything you've done for us."

"Then it's time to break protocol and my own rule, and ask you for a hug."

I smiled, stood up, and held out my arms.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"I wish I could come to opening night on Thursday," Chelsea asked when I called her after play practice on Monday.

"I don't think Thursday is practical," I said. "But you'll be here Friday night and Saturday night, so you could come to both of those, and the Sunday afternoon matinée, if you wanted. Just take the train on Friday evening with my mom, and she'll bring you to the school."

"All three performances?"

"If you want. I can get you in for free, not that money is really a concern. And you're obviously invited to the cast party on Sunday after the final performance. You can stay Sunday night as well and take the train into the city in the morning with Mom and Eduardo, and make it to class with time to spare."

"That sounds like a good plan! How was practice today?"

"We had our undress rehearsal today. We'll have our first dress rehearsal tomorrow, and another one on Wednesday."

"So you were naked?" Chelsea teased.

"No costumes!" I chuckled. "Not no clothes!"

"Oh," Chelsea giggled.

"Somehow, I think Mr. Fruits wouldn't keep his job if we performed. *Oh! Calcutta!*"

"What's that?" Chelsea asked.

"The longest-running theatrical revue in history," I replied. "It opened Off-Broadway in 1969, then played in London in the West End the next year. It was, and is, extremely controversial because it features extended male and female nudity. It's basically erotic from start to finish, but not obscene."

"Have you seen it?"

"No. A revival ran on Broadway from 1976 to 1989, and I was born in '87."

"How do you know about it?"

"Drama class. We did a section on controversial movies, plays, musicals, and comedy acts. Mainly we discussed people like George Carlin and Frank Zappa, and movies like *Midnight Cowboy*, but also other artists who made Tipper Gore's list. The crazy part is during the hearings, the Senators called Elvis 'innocent' and you know how controversial he was!"

"Uptight people are a menace!"

"I agree. I see Eduardo, so I'm going to get into the car and go home for dinner and do my homework! Talk to you tomorrow?"

"I love you, Matt!"

"I love you, Chelsea!"



October 1, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Tuesday, when school let out, I said 'goodbye' to Fangsu and hurried home, as Peter and Julie were supposed to come over for my first threesome and her joint deflowering. I'd really been looking forward to today, but I knew Peter was a bit skittish, and Julie as nervous as well, so there was a chance things wouldn't go the way I hoped they would.

As soon as I arrived at the house, I went up to my room, took a quick shower, then dressed in cute shorts and a polo shirt, with a pink bra and panties under them, then went downstairs to get something to drink. I had just finished my glass of orange juice when the doorbell rang. I hurried to the foyer and opened the door to see Julie, who I invited in.

"Is Peter here?" she asked.

"Not yet. He'll be here in about ten minutes. Is this something you still want to do?"

"You won't be upset if I don't?"

"No. Remember what I said -- no pressure."

"Would you and Peter let me watch you, then I can decide?"

I was positive if she watched, and Peter and I didn't get crazy, that she'd want to do it, but I also wondered if that might lead her to do something she wasn't really ready to do. I wasn't quite sure how to resolve that question, and while it really was up to her, I didn't want her to regret anything we might do.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "But I have a concern that you might get too excited and make a bad decision."

"What do you mean?" Julie asked.

"Sex is exciting and fun, and it's possible to do things you don't really want to do because you're so excited. I know girls who have gone all the way and regretted it because they didn't really want to, but the guy had them so «*Uphetsad*» that they couldn't stop!"

"What's that word?"

"It's the name of a song by a Swedish group Gyllene Tider about being sexually excited. It literally means 'heated up' but is better translated 'turned on'."

"That's right, your dad taught you Swedish for when you're an exchange student. Are you fluent?"

"I would say I speak conversational Swedish. I'll be fluent like Dad once I'm there and use it all the time. Dad said he knew he was fluent when he started dreaming in Swedish."

"Whoa! That would be like totally weird! I can't imagine dreaming in French!"

"Can you imagine *doing* French?" I asked with a smirk.

Julie laughed, "You remember I said I'd never even kissed, right?"

"Yes."

"Could we try?"

"Sure!" I declared, hoping that would calm her nerves, and it was safe enough to do while we had our clothes on.

Because Patricia would be home soon, we couldn't really use my room, so I took Julie's hand and led her to what Dad called the Playroom, past a smirking Ashley, and closed the door behind us. When we were in the bedroom, I gently pulled Julie into my arms and looked into her eyes.

"OK to kiss you?" I asked.

She bit her lip, then nodded. I decided to start with just a soft lip kiss and see how she reacted, so I touched my lips to hers. Julie shuddered, wrapped her arms around me, parted her lips and pushed her tongue into my mouth! I was surprised at that, but went with it and we exchanged a fierce French kiss, our tongues dancing around each other. We kissed for a minute before Julie broke the kiss.

"Wow!" she gasped.

"It gets better!" I exclaimed. "You could try an Aussie kiss!"

"What's that?" Julie asked.

"A French kiss, down under!" I said with a giggle as I ran my finger over the front of her jeans.

"You've done that, right?"

"Yes. And had it done! It feels heavenly! Of course, boys are totally freaking clueless, so you have to teach them, but once you do..."

"But girls know?"

"Well, given I have a pussy and a clit, I have a pretty good idea of how to make them feel good!"

"I bet! Do you think Peter would be upset if I only did stuff with you?"

"I'm positive I can make sure Peter won't complain!" I exclaimed, licking my lips.

Julie rolled her eyes, "Boys and blowjobs! Can I ask you something?"

"Of course!"

"What does it taste like? I mean, a girl?"

"Well, I've only done that with one girl, so I don't have a large sample size, but if you remember my Aunt Bethany's book it says that it depends on each girl's physiology, including what she eats, the clothes she wears, how recently she had her period, and a bunch of other stuff."

"And guys?"

"The same thing, though what they eat seems to be more of a factor."

"How many different guys, if I can ask?"

"Three. And one girl. Well, you're the third girl I've kissed, but I only had sex with one."

There was a knock at the door, so I went to open it.

"Peter is here," Ashley said with a smirk. "Do I send him into the lion's den?"

"Lionesses' den!" I giggled. "Yes!"

Ashley rolled her eyes and left, then returned with Peter, who came into the Playroom, and I shut the door behind him.

"Why here?" he asked.

"Patricia will be home soon and I didn't want to lock her out of my room! And this room has the mirrors on the ceiling!"

"Mirrors?" Julie asked.

I got onto the bed so I could reach the silk cloth that covered the mirror and removed it, then got off the bed.

"You can watch me give you an Aussie kiss!" I said with a silly smile.

"WHOA!" Julie gasped.

"Aussie kiss?" Peter asked.

"A French kiss down under!" I giggled, repeating what I'd said to Julie just before Peter had arrived. "Peter, Julie's not sure how much she wants to do, but I promise you'll have a good time!"

Peter responded with a silly smile, "As if that was ever a question with you!"

"I am just that good!" I declared. "Peter," I said, "let's undress and let Julie see! OK, Julie?"

She bit her lip and nodded, so I looked over at Peter and pulled off my polo shirt. He pulled his polo shirt over his head and we both kept removing clothes until we were naked. Peter was rock hard and Julie stared at his dick with her eyes wide. That gave me an idea of how best to proceed.

I grabbed Peter's hand, maneuvered him to sit on the bed, then knelt down in front of him. I looked up, winked, then slowly took him into my mouth, running my tongue around his spongy glans and hard shaft. I'd been with him enough times to know exactly what he liked and how to make him cum, and we only had a few hours, so I used my excellent oral skills to make him shoot into my mouth just three minutes later.

I stood up and went over to Julie, opening my mouth to show her I hadn't swallowed and her eyes went wide again, but she didn't shy away when I kissed her, and our tongues swirled around each other, sharing Peter's cum. We broke the kiss, and Julie made a face.

"That was weird," she said.

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize! I didn't say it was gross or anything, just that it was weird!"

"I'm sure Peter won't mind if you get it direct from the source!"

"I'm, uhm, er, not sure. Could I watch you guys do it?"

"Yes," I replied., then turned to Peter, "Sixty-nine then fuck?"

"As if you have to ask!" he replied with a grin.

I pulled down the comforter, and we got into bed. We kissed, then I turned, straddled Peter's face, and as he plunged his tongue into me, I took his deflated dick into my mouth. Because he'd just cum, it took a bit of effort to get him hard, but as soon as Peter's dick was standing straight up, I turned, straddled him, and slowly lowered myself onto his erection.

I didn't want to scare Julie by riding Peter as wildly as I usually did, so I moved slowly up and down, and back and forth, squeezing my muscles to ensure Peter felt as good as I did with him inside of me. When I was close to cumming, I leaned down and offered Peter my nipple to suck. He took it into his mouth, ran his tongue around it, and that was exactly what I needed to get me off. I had two more orgasms before Peter shot into me and I moved off of him.

"Want to try?" I asked Julie.

"What you just did? Or with you?"

"It's up to you," I said. "Remember, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do. We won't be upset. You could start by taking off your clothes, if you want to."

Julie didn't say anything, and she didn't move for about a minute, then she carefully pulled her polo shirt over her head, revealing a blue cotton bra holding her boobs, which were bigger than mine. Next, she unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans and stepped out of them, showing blue cotton panties which matched her bra. She paused for a short time, took a deep breath, then removed her bra and slipped off her panties.

She was absolutely gorgeous and her body was more developed than mine, which annoyed me, though I felt I had hope because both Aunt Stephanie, who I looked like, and Mom both had bigger boobs than I did. Both Peter and I looked her up and down and smiled. I got out of bed, but used my hand to indicate Peter should stay in bed. I went over to Julie and held out my arms.

Julie tentatively stepped into them and we embraced, pressing our bodies together. I kissed her on her lips and once again, she parted them and we exchanged a fierce French kiss, our hard nipples pressed together and our hands

roaming each other's backs. After a minute, we broke the kiss and Julie was breathing hard.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"Can we just make out?" Julie asked. "You and me and me and Peter?"

"Yes," I replied.



October 2, 2002, Oswego, Illinois

 Michael

"I have the challenge list from the competition during Christmas break," Mr. Perez said when we met for Robotics Club on Wednesday after school. "The first one is collecting tennis balls in a field that has barriers and narrow passageways. The balls are colored and numbered, and each one has a point value. The balls have to be returned to a goal, similar to a hockey goal.

"The second challenge is similar, but it involves collecting golf balls, which are colored and numbered. They need to be collected in order, and deposited in a suspended basket. The same robot has to do both, though the grasping arm can be changed between competitions. There are weight and size limits for the robot. The first field is covered in two inches of marbles, while for the second one, the marbles are covered in two inches of sand."

"Could we use treads instead of wheels?" Manuel asked.

"No. The bots have to use wheels, and there are maximum dimensions."

"Is there a limit to the number of axles or wheels?" Darius, a new member, asked.

"No," Mr. Perez replied. "Simply a maximum width and radius."

"Then we can double them, similar to a semi-trailer," Darius said. "That will give us more surface area and therefore more grip."

"What's the time limit?" Andi asked.

"Seven minutes for each challenge."

"Do we get to know where the numbered balls are placed and their point value?" I asked.

"It's on the diagram for the challenge field."

"I'd say we have a lot of design work to do!" Andi declared. "We should get to it!"

 Matthew

Marian (Maggie): No, please, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

Harold Hill (Matthew): Oh, my dear little librarian. You pile up enough tomorrows, and you'll find you've collected nothing but a lot of empty yesterdays. I don't know about you, but I'd like to make today worth remembering.

Marian: Oh, so would I.

As Maggie and I said those lines during the dress rehearsal, I wondered how Chelsea would react to the flirtation, the innuendo, and the stage kiss. I had, on one occasion, admitted to Maggie that I'd thought about kissing her, and that was when we'd had stage kisses and acted as lovers in some of the performances.

I wondered if Mr. Fruits was trying to tell us something by always pairing us together.

One thing was certain, and that was that Chelsea had absolutely nothing to worry about. As I'd said to Maggie, I had no interest in being with any girl other than Chelsea, and as Maggie had correctly pointed out, Chelsea and I were engaged, at least in our minds, given the State of Illinois would lose its shit if it found out about our relationship.

"That's a wrap!" Mr. Fruits called out when we reached the end of the script. "We're ready for tomorrow night!"

We all needed to change out of our costumes, so we went to the room set aside for costumes, and changed, guys on one side of a divider, and girls on the other. Once we'd changed, Maggie and I left together as her dad was giving me a ride home.

"What performance is Chelsea attending?" Maggie asked as we left the school building.

"Friday, Saturday, and Sunday," I replied.

"She must really love you!" Maggie teased.

"Hey, we're really good! The barbershop quartet is as good as any I've heard!"

"Leave it to Matt Adams to ignore the fact I was teasing!"

"And leave it to Maggie Jones to try to tease me, knowing how I respond!"

Mr. Jones was waiting for us, so we got right into the car, with Maggie in front, with her dad and me in the back.

"Home, James!" I said.

Mr. Jones, whose name was 'Joseph', laughed and put the car into gear.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"We're ready," Maggie said. "Are you still planning to come to opening night?"

"Yes," Mr. Jones replied.

"Thanks for hosting the cast party on Sunday," I said to him.

"You're welcome!"

Of course, the main reason they were hosting was to prevent any 'shenanigans', as Maggie's mom had called them. I fully expected the future cast parties to be at Maggie's house or at Gario's, as Maggie's parents were still very uncomfortable with that aspect of drama, even if they had mellowed about the actual performances. Of course, Mr. Fruits had done his best to limit any controversy about play selection, because Maggie's parents hadn't been the only ones to complain.

"Matt, when is Chelsea coming out from Loyola?"

"On Friday," I replied. "She'll take the train with Mom, then go back to school on Monday morning."

"I find it odd that she's in college when you're a Sophomore in High School," Mr. Jones observed.

"Don't blame me!" I declared. "Chelsea decided we were going to marry when I was five and she was eight! I had about as much choice in the matter as Mark does!"

"HEY!" Maggie protested.

Mr. Jones laughed, "It does seem to work that way! Mary decided we were going to marry and pursued that goal doggedly!"

"Evidence suggests it's almost always that way," I declared. "Aunt Jessica pursued Dad, my sister Stephie pursued Nicholas, and Andi is pursuing Michael, though he doesn't realize it just yet!"

"He's thirteen, right?"

"Yes, and in eighth grade. She's playing it smart, because she's using a computer and robotics to entice him! He'll be trapped and won't even realize how it happened!"

Mr. Jones and Maggie both laughed.

"Trapped?" Maggie asked. "Is that how you feel about Chelsea?"

"I sure did when I was five! Dad and Mom both thought I might be packing my bags to run away after Chelsea declared she was going to marry me when I was five!"

"Is your sister still on the outs with Nicholas?" Maggie asked.

"Yes, though she's at least civil to everyone else. Puberty really hit her hard."

"I wasn't exactly sane when I was twelve!" Maggie declared.

"And that's different from now, exactly how?" I asked with a smirk.

"Good one, Matt!" Mr. Jones declared.

"Just wait, Matt Adams!" Maggie threatened.

"Oh, look, we're at my house!" I declared. "See you tomorrow!"

"Good night, Matt," Mr. Jones said.

"You're still in trouble, Matt!" Maggie growled.

"Uh huh!" I said with a grin.

I got out of the car, closed the door, waved, then headed into the house.



October 3, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I have your tickets for tonight," Elyse said, coming into my office on Thursday morning.

She handed me tickets for the family to the musical.

"Thanks. How are things going with the IRS?"

"They haven't asked for anything I think is out of line, so I'd say it's proceeding as normal for an audit. There won't be a resolution for months, most likely.

They'll gather the data, flag anything they want to investigate, then interview the appropriate people, if they feel that's necessary. I doubt there will be much of that because we don't play any tax avoidance games. Sure, we avoid taxes, as is our patriotic duty, but not with any questionable shelters or 'too cute' ideas that attract 'imperial entanglements', as you like to call them!"

"Well, Congress certainly routinely says they have altered the deal, though they don't even bother to ask us to pray they don't alter it further! Anyway, I'll see you at the school tonight at 7:00pm with the entire gang."

"Great!"

She left, and I turned back to my workstation, only to be interrupted by *adium*.

mea_nani9595: Hi!

NIKASteve: Hi, Keiki!

mea_nani9595: Busy?

NIKASteve: No. What's up?

mea_nani9595: I had my interview, and I heard from both Mr. Bannerman and Doctor Nie.

NIKASteve: Good. What did they have to say?

mea_nani9595: Neither of them has any real input into the aerospace engineering program, but Mr. Bannerman said he would recommend me for admission based on your endorsement, and said he'd get me into the Computer Science program if nothing else.

NIKASteve: OK. That's good. I take it the interview went well?

mea_nani9595: Yes! I should hear within a month about early acceptance.

NIKASteve: Great! What about scholarships?

mea_nani9595: I filled out all the paperwork, but that takes until March, at least.

NIKASteve: Did you hear from Dale Melrose at Boeing?

mea_nani9595: Yes. He put me in touch with the right people

about an internship, but there isn't money for anyone who is not an employee or child of an employee, except for interns.

NIKASteve: OK.

mea_nani9595: I want to explore a possible arrangement! I'm making a campus visit in December. Meet me there? To discuss it?

NIKASteve: Possibly. My son has a hockey tournament in Canada during Christmas break. Let me know the dates for your trip.

mea_nani9595: I will once the tickets are booked. It's before Christmas while school is in session.

NIKASteve: LOL. Yes, of course, I should have realized. Let me know.

mea_nani9595: Will do in a week or so.

NIKASteve: Cool!

mea_nani9595: Looking forward to it!

NIKASteve: Me, too.

mea_nani9595: Bye!

NIKASteve: Bye!

I minimized *adium* and opened my development environment. I wondered about the wisdom of getting involved with Keiki, but I had some time to think about it. The arrangement with María Cristina had worked out quite well, but it also hadn't been a clearly stated *quid pro quo*. That didn't bother me, per se, but it was something I had to consider in the overall scheme of things.

One possible solution would be for me to guarantee her loans which she'd easily be able to pay back after she obtained her Master's degree and went to work for an aerospace company. One intriguing possibility was a new company, SpaceX, which had been founded by PayPal CEO Elon Musk, earlier in the year. He had, during the previous year, pitched buying Russian ICBMs for a Mars project, something which Lyudmila's husband had mentioned to me. That had fallen through, and now Musk was looking to build reusable rockets, with a goal of a first launch in two to three years.

I wondered if any of my friends or business acquaintances in California had any contacts within the company, which was based in El Segundo, which was near Santa Monica, north of Los Angeles. That actually made me think of Muhammed Kuftaro, Aisyah's father, and his engineering background. With the various startups in California of all forms, I wondered if he might be able to return to engineering, though at this point, I felt he probably preferred being a businessman.

Bringing my thoughts back from the rabbit trail about Muhammed, I decided to pick up the phone and call Ben Jackson and find out if he had any contacts with the California aerospace industry and ask if he was willing to make an introduction. I called, but he was out of the office at a meeting, so I left a message rather than call his mobile, which I had.

"Ready to get back to work?" Penny asked, coming into the office as I hung up the phone.

"I see you've primed yourself with sugar and caffeine!"

She had two Krispy Kreme donuts and a large mug of coffee.

"Hey, just be glad I don't eat Cheetos and Doritos and drink Mountain Dew by the gallon the way Greg did!"

"The reason we started buying silicone keyboard covers by the case," I chuckled. "You have one on your keyboard!"

"I don't consider it a 'sterile field' the way you do! Jess could perform surgery on your keyboard!"

"The keyboard is a bit small, and she doesn't do neo-natal surgery!"

Penny rolled her eyes, "You know what I meant!"

"Of course, but it's so much more fun to tease you!"

"You could tease my..."

"Penelope Margret!" I said sternly, but then we both broke up laughing.

"Just no fun!"

"Shall we get back to work?"

"I suppose," she said with a theatrical sigh.

XXX. Delay of Game(s)

October 3, 2002, Oswego, Illinois

 Ashley

"Matthew is really good," I said quietly to Birgit, who was sitting next to me in the theater.

"Of course he is," she replied. "He's an Adams! Even if his last name is Clarke!"

The whole cast was really good, but Matthew did an excellent job as Professor Harold Hill, and once again, he was kissing Maggie Jones on stage. I'd actually seen him kiss her more than I'd seen him kiss Chelsea, because they were very private about that, mostly because she was eighteen and he was fifteen.

Maggie was cute, and I wondered if Matthew had considered taking Dad's approach to life. I doubted it, because he and Chelsea had been a couple for my entire life. I expected him to never, ever be with anyone else, which I thought was true about Albert and Jane. And Stephe, if she ever got her head out of her butt, would be the same with Nicholas.

I was more like Birgit and Jesse, in that there was no way I was going to tie myself to one person before I graduated from High School, and probably not before I graduated from college. After all, High School and college were supposed to be fun, and a time to experiment, not a time to be in an exclusive relationship! But it was their choice, so I would never say anything to any of them. Well, except Birgit, who I liked to tease because it was SO easy to do!

"We are just that good, aren't we?" I said back to Birgit.

"Duh!" she giggled.

"SHHH!" some woman behind us hissed.

I rolled my eyes, though she couldn't see, because the cast was singing and it was LOUD so that my whispers to Birgit couldn't have interfered with her hearing to music and singing. When the play finished, Dad, my moms, Suzanne, Yuriko, Natalie, my sisters, Albert, Jesse, and his moms all left the theater and headed to Aunt Elyse's house. Matthew would come home with Eduardo after changing out of his costume.

"Where's Chelsea?" I asked Aunt Elyse.

"In the city," Aunt Elyse replied. "She has class in the morning. She'll be here tomorrow night."

Matthew arrived about ten minutes later, and we all had cake and ice cream, including Dad, because Birgit and I had made an almond flour cake for him and we'd brought some of the ice cream made with stevia, which he could eat. That made him much happier, though he never really complained about his diet limitations.

When we finished our cake and ice cream, we piled into three cars to head back into the city.



October 4, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Friday afternoon, after school, I did homework with Fangsu so that I didn't have to worry about it for the rest of the weekend, then got ready for my date with Philip. I still wasn't sure how to approach the entire topic of sex with him, and I didn't just mean fucking, but even kissing. I was sure part of it was because I was fourteen, but I was reasonably sure part of it was because he was totally inexperienced.

On the other hand, I was positive Bob had gone for his STI test, and when he came over on Saturday so we could do our next Photography Club project, he'd ask the question I'd suggested, and I'd have to decide if I wanted to fool around with him or not. I obviously could, but what I didn't want to do was mess up the good thing we had about photography. I was pretty sure he'd be OK with just sex, but I also got the drift that he was looking for a steady girlfriend, and I wanted no part of that!

Then there was Julie, who hadn't done more than make out, but who had made it clear when she'd left on Tuesday that she was interested in getting together again. Peter hadn't objected, and he certainly hadn't complained about two blowjobs from me, plus a pretty good fuck in between. We'd missed our usual Thursday afternoon because of Matthew's play, but Peter never complained when we missed an 'appointment', as Aunt Melanie had called her times with Dad.

"What are you doing tonight?" Patricia asked, coming into the room.

"Going out for Chinese food, then I'm not sure, because there's nothing good at the theaters that we can all get into see. What are you doing?"

"Your mom is taking me to my friend's house. We're going to watch *Snow White*."

"What's your brother doing?"

"He's at Bobby's house. I'm not sure what they're doing. Some boy thing like video games, I'm sure!"

"They'll figure out why we're better than video games, eventually!"

"Yuck! Not my brother!"

I laughed, "I didn't mean that, obviously!"

"But Bobby is cute!"

I laughed, "Which is, of course, what I meant!"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"You were awesome!" Chelsea said when I arrived home after the performance.

"Thanks!"

"Are we doing anything tomorrow?"

"That's up to you, really. Maggie and Mark have a church thing, but the guys are available. But it's up to you if you just want to hang out together."

"Let's just hang out together. Do you think we could borrow your mom's car and go to the mall? I need a better winter coat, maybe a parka, because it gets a lot colder here than it does in Cincinnati."

"I'm positive Mom would be OK with us borrowing her car. We could have lunch out, too."

"Cool. Do you have homework?"

"Yes. I planned to do it tomorrow morning, and I should be able to finish by the time the mall opens. Do you need to study or do homework?"

"I finished most of it on the train, so I can finish tomorrow morning while you do yours."

"Awesome! Let's get some snacks and cuddle in front of the TV."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

We had a great time at the Chinese restaurant and everyone agreed there were no movies we could all see, so we decided to go back to our house. Some of the older kids wanted to see *Red Dragon*, which was a continuation of the 'Hannibal Lecter' story. It was rated 'R', which meant most of us couldn't get in because the dumb government felt it was 'inappropriate' when I could, without any restrictions, get any movie I wanted via Netflix, HBO, Showtime, or Cinemax. After a debate, with the guys wanting to watch *Enemy at the Gates*, the girls won, and we agreed to watch *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

After popping popcorn and making sure everyone had a drink, I sat down next to Philip, and after about ten minutes, snuggled close. He didn't push me away or say anything, so I rested my head on his shoulder. If I could just get him comfortable with the idea of kissing, I was sure it would lead to what I wanted, because I was completely irresistible! Well, to any *sane* guy who wasn't freaked out about me being fourteen, anyway.

As the movie played, I contemplated if I should try to push things forward, but I decided it was better to simply bank my gains, and just give Philip a 'good night'

kiss on the cheek, because I didn't want to drive him away. It still amazed me how difficult it had been for me to have sex the first time, and how difficult it was to find an older guy.

I was positive that if it were the 70s, or even the 80s, it wouldn't have been nearly so difficult, but society had decided I wasn't in control of my own body, and the same idiots who said I couldn't consent to sex were trying to make abortion illegal, taking away even MORE of my control over my own body! Society just needed to butt out and let me live my life the way I wanted and control my own body.

When the movie ended, I walked Philip to the door, kissed his cheek, and we agreed we'd see each other the following Friday.

 Jesse

When the movie ended, most of the gang left, and Ebele asked if I'd walk her home so she didn't have to call her parents.

"It's before curfew," I said. "I'll do it, obviously, but why?"

"Dad is concerned about me walking alone because of all the crime."

I rolled my eyes, "The TV news and newspapers blow it totally out of proportion! Walking from here to your house is about as safe as anyplace in the city! It's not like you're walking through Cabrini Green!"

"I know," she replied with a smile. "It's my dad, not me! He's a bit overprotective."

"I totally get that, but how far is he going to take it?"

"It's not *too* bad, because he's OK with me walking when it's light out. It's not nearly as much a problem during the Summer, but now that it's getting dark earlier, it's inconvenient."

"OK. Then let's go, so I can get home before the city curfew."

We left the Compound and headed towards Ebele's house.

"Were you serious about what you said last week?"

"Which thing?" I asked.

"That you would be happy to demonstrate to an interested girl who's had an STD test."

"I was totally serious. Are you interested?"

"Yes, but Jesse, you have to promise not to go further than I want."

"I'd say 'obviously', but I know there are guys who do take things further. I promise."

"Can I come over tomorrow?"

"We have a hockey game at 1:00pm, so either in the morning or after 3:30pm."

"I could come over around 9:00am if that's OK."

"It is."

"And could you give me a ride to the hockey game?"

"Absolutely!"

When we reached her house, she said 'good night' and went inside, and I turned to head back to the Compound.



October 5, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Saturday morning, Dad, Mom, and Suzanne were up early, as they usually were, so they could walk my other mom to work. Once they'd done that, Suzanne, Dad, and I went out for our run, then returned home. Suzanne and Dad showered together, and I showered alone, then went downstairs so I could have my cuddle time.

"What plans do you have today?" Dad asked, as I snuggled close.

"Well, if it were up to me..." I teased.

"Besides your fantasy that has to remain a fantasy!"

"Are you ever going to be able to tell me the real reason why? I mean, the one besides my moms saying 'no'?"

"No," Dad replied. "And your moms saying 'no' would have been sufficient. And remember, that was their *advice*; they didn't forbid it. That said, even had they said 'yes', the answer would still be 'no' because of the reason I can't share with you."

"That sounds an awfully lot like 'because I said so'," I countered.

"It might, but I honestly do have a very good reason, just one I can't share with you. And you know I almost always share my reasoning."

"Do my moms know?"

"Yes. And they agree it has to stay private."

I'd wondered what it might possibly be since he'd first mentioned it, but had no idea even where to begin. I knew it had to be something big, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what it might be. I also wondered if Ashley was correct about Dad being willing to do it had I kept it totally secret. I wasn't so sure about that, given there was some other reason besides my moms.

"Is there an afternoon class at the dojo today? I saw that Jesse's game is listed as '1300' because of Albert's insistence we use military time!"

Dad laughed, "It does ensure no confusion! Miyu will lead the class today. Why are you asking?"

"Because Bob will be here for lunch and I was hoping to be able to skip today."

"That's totally up to you, Pumpkin. You're responsible for your own progress both towards your black belt, and as a black belt. You know I miss from time to time, and the key is to not make a habit of missing, as it becomes easier to miss than to attend."

"Which is why we encourage new students to attend at least three times a week so that they develop good habits."

"Exactly. And why one of the black belts follows up with anyone who misses a class without calling first. It's about accountability, and accountability is a key to success."

"Kind of like me not wanting to disappoint you, right?"

"Very much like that. What are you and Bob going to do?"

Well, my answer *should* be that it depended on him showing me a clean STI test, but my period had started the previous night, and I doubted Bob would want to lick me the first time when the playground was covered in blood! There was also the question of whether or not it was a good idea. I still wasn't sure, not that I didn't want to, because I did, but I also didn't want to mess things up with my photography buddy.

"Besides lunch, I'm not sure. He might hang around tonight while you have Guys' Night and Girls' Night Out, but someone would need to give him a ride home before midnight."

"I'm sure we can manage that."

"Are you playing poker tonight?"

"Yes, but someone who is knocked out can use my car to drive Bob home if I'm still playing."

"Thanks, Dad! You're the best!"

"I know!" Dad replied.

"HEY!" I protested. "You can't steal MY answers!"

"Sorry, Your Worship!" Dad teased.

"In my dreams!"

"Breakfast!" Ashley called out.

"Be right there," Dad said.

I snuggled close to get my three extra minutes of cuddling.

 Jesse

Ebele arrived just after 9:00am, and I decided it was best for us to go to the Duck's Nest in the basement, rather than introduce her to my moms and take her right up to my bedroom. That way, if she was nervous, or had second thoughts, or whatever, there would be no pressure and no potential embarrassment.

"How can this work with your moms home?" she asked after we went downstairs.

"My moms won't say anything," I replied. "And I'm allowed to entertain in my room if I want, and they won't ask any questions."

"They'd really let you do that? While they're here?"

"They believe, just as my dad does, that it's up to me to make those decisions, and so long as everyone consents, we use birth control, and everyone has a clean STI test, that it's not their business."

"My dad thinks my body is his business! Like he owns it, or something!"

"I do believe my sisters would commit patricide if my dad had that opinion!"

"Your whole family seems pretty mellow."

"We believe that every individual is best suited to decide what is right for their own self, with the goal of never doing any harm to anyone. It's an ideal, and almost impossible to achieve, but it's our guiding principle."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Always."

"Have you ever been with a black girl before?"

"No," I replied with a silly smile, "But I'm sure the parts are in the same place, look the same, feel the same, and taste the same! Well, with minor variations between girls."

"You've been with a lot of girls, haven't you?"

"More than one," I replied. "And that's all I'm going to say."

"I know at least two," Ebele observed.

"Only if they told you," I replied. "I try my best not to talk about it, because I'm positive you don't want anyone to know about what you asked me to do today, right?"

"Right," she agreed. "I had my test, and it was clean."

"I do need to see the test paper," I replied. "I trust you, but that's my dad's rule."

Ebele opened her purse and pulled out a folded sheet of paper and handed it to me. It was, as she said, clean, so I handed it back to her and she put it back in her purse.

"Am I supposed to look at yours?"

"Absolutely," I said.

I pulled my wallet from my pocket and showed her my STI test card.

"You promise that if I take my clothes off, you won't do anything I don't want you to do?" Ebele asked.

"I promised you that," I replied. "Honestly, if you don't trust me, then it's probably best if you go home."

"I don't want to go home!" Ebele protested. "But..."

She paused, so I completed her thought.

"...you're nervous," I said gently. "That's normal. How much have you done?"

"Nothing," Ebele admitted.

"And you want the first thing you do to be me putting my mouth between your legs? I'm thinking a kiss might be a better way to start."

"It would be kind of strange to have that done before I had my first kiss."

"It's up to you," I said.

"You don't seem excited about it," Ebele said.

"If I did seem excited, I'm concerned you'd be concerned I wasn't going to keep my word."

Ebele frowned, "I'm making a mess of this."

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Yes."

"Let's go use the sauna, just you and me, and get used to the idea of being naked together. Then, another day, you can ask again."

"You're not upset?"

"No. What do you think of my plan?"

"It's a good one," she replied.

"Then let's go to the sauna."

 Birgit

Bob arrived about 11:30am for our lunch, and we took our lunch to the 'Indian' room so we could have some privacy from my sisters and cousins. While we were eating, he pulled a folded paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and slid it to me. I recognized immediately what it was, and it showed, as expected, 'negative' for each test result. I pushed it back to him.

"Do you want to fuck?" he asked with a smirk.

I had promised an immediate answer, but I also needed to express my concern.

"Yes, but there are conditions and a caveat."

"I have some, too!" he said with a smirk. "What are your conditions? I mean, besides the STI test, which I just showed you?"

"First, I'm not looking for a boyfriend; second, it can't interfere with photography; third, it stays private between you and me."

"Fair enough; I accept!" Bob declared.

I felt I had to let the use of the 'F' word go, and I'd teach him THAT another time.

"And your conditions?" I asked.

"Given I believe you're experienced, you agree to teach me everything!"

I giggled, "Be careful what you ask for!"

"Are you kidding? If you're the sex goddess you've implied you are, then I've come to the right place to cum!"

I laughed, "I'd say! Next question -- how much have you done?"

"Kissing, touching, and giving oral."

"Not receiving?"

Bob shrugged, "What can I say? But only once, so I'm sure I could use expert instruction!"

I laughed, "You seem to have a very clear theory about my skills!"

"Says the most self-confident person I've ever met! What's your caveat?"

"I got my period last night," I replied. "So, unless we're going to have 'Saturday Bloody Saturday', we need to wait until the next time we're together alone. The playing field is covered in blood at the moment! Sorry."

Bob laughed, "It's a biological process I'm familiar with, at least from a guy's perspective! I think I can wait a week to 'clear the playing field', as it were!"

"I'm curious, but with only giving, what did you do about it?"

"What any respectful guy would do! I went into the bathroom and took care of it. Can I ask about that phrase you used?"

"There was a movie in 1971 called *Sunday Bloody Sunday* about a love triangle in London that had a bisexual guy. It was way ahead of its time, because it showed a gay kiss. My aunts have it on VHS."

"I wondered, because it didn't make sense that it was the U2 song by the same name, because that has to do with the IRA!"

"I know that song from *War*," I said. "but didn't even think about it! I thought about the movie because I watched it with my aunts a few months ago."

"Out of curiosity, what have you done?"

I giggled, "Pretty much anything you can think of with boys or girls."

"You're bi?!" Bob asked, surprised.

"No, I'm Birgit! Labels are dumb because everyone is unique. I experimented, it was fun, but I like guys WAY better!"

"Now I have to ask," Bob said with a grin, "a threesome?"

"Kind of," I replied. "The girl was nervous and things didn't go too far."

"Would you, again?" he inquired.

"Meghan or Mariana?" I asked with a smirk.

"Meghan. She's curious. Mariana is as straight as they come. But we're getting ahead of ourselves!"

"Has she gone all the way?"

"No."

"Recipient?"

"No comment."

I smiled, "Good answer. I shouldn't have asked, but I'm actually glad I did and glad you refused to answer."

"Respectful, remember?"

I nodded, "I do, and outside the bedroom, that's good. IN the bedroom, I don't want to be respected, I want to be fucked, licked, and fingered to multiple orgasms!"

"I'll do my best!" Bob replied with a grin.

"Well, you're going to get the chance to fuck me, even if I'm not the Prom queen!"

"*The Rock*, right?"

"Exactly! You seem to have seen a lot of movies."

"Mom and Dad have a decent collection, and we have Netflix. With my parents busy all the time, I had plenty of time to watch movies."

"We watch a lot of movies, too, but mostly as a group. That's our usual thing to do with our gang on Friday night."

"How does one join this gang?" Bob asked.

I could invite him, but that might create problems with Philip, and I felt I was making progress there. The question in my mind was what to say, and I came up with an answer.

"It's my brother Jesse's group of friends, mostly his hockey team and the softball team," I replied. "I hang with them sometimes when I'm not with my Girl Gang, as dad calls it."

Bob smirked, "I wouldn't mind hanging out with a girl gang!"

I laughed, "I bet!"

"So, what are we doing after lunch?"

"We could go to my brother's hockey game, if you're interested. Or there's plenty of stuff to do here or in the city."

"Why don't we go into the city? It's going to be cold and windy soon enough, and there won't be too many more days we can be outside without totally bundling up."

"Sounds good!"

 Jesse

"Could I get a ride to the rink with you?" Ebele asked while we ate lunch. "I would just need to call my parents and let them know."

"Sure. My moms are meeting me there. I'm driving my aunt's car, but so long as it's just you and me, that's not a problem."

"Why would it be otherwise?"

"Until I'm eighteen, I can only have one other person under eighteen in the car while I'm driving, except siblings, unless there's a licensed driver over eighteen in the passenger seat."

"Who made that dumb rule?"

"The same people who make ALL the dumb rules! Politicians! Did you see *Footloose*?"

"Sure."

"Think about the dancing ban. There was a bad accident, and they overreacted. That's how you get dumb laws. No politician is willing to say 'shit happens' because the public always demands 'something be done' and then you end up with escalation as politicians try to outdo each other in 'doing something'. Mostly, they should just shut the fuck up and leave us alone."

We finished eating, then Ebele called her parents to let them know she was riding to the rink with me. I got my gear, loaded it into Aunt Jessica's car, and we headed for the rink.

"Thanks for being nice about things today," Ebele said as I turned north on Halsted.

"I tend to be very careful about things like that," I replied. "It's too easy to push things too far in the 'heat of the moment'."

"Have you?" Ebele asked. "I mean, had things go further than they should have, not that you took advantage of anyone or whatever."

"With one girl," I replied. "She regretted it after the fact, even though everything was totally consensual. And that's why I was so careful today. The last thing I want is for you to regret doing something. I mean, it's always possible, and maybe not for years, but it's foolish to invite that kind of reaction."

"Speaking of reactions, you didn't have one."

"Because nudity is not about sex," I replied. "To be blunt, I've seen so many naked females in the sauna that it doesn't faze me. If, on the other hand, we were kissing and stuff, then I would have been at full mast!"

"How, uhm, big is it?"

"It's fit for purpose," I smirked. "I've never measured, and honestly, size doesn't matter so long as the girl is happy."

"I was more concerned about it being too big," Ebele said.

"Well, if you're referring to intercourse, I do have to point out that babies pass through the place where it would go!"

Ebele laughed, "Obviously! I was thinking more about, uhm, reciprocating."

"If your information about oral sex and guys is from the girls' locker room, it's probably about as accurate as what's said in the guys' locker room! You said you read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*, and I know you said you didn't believe some of the things in there about STIs, but, honestly, everything in that book is accurate, and I can say so from experience, except for being with a guy."

"That would be gross, don't you think? I mean, that's what I would think about another girl."

"I don't think it's gross," I replied. "Just different, and not for me. I have gay friends, and it doesn't bother me. It's like anything else -- if you don't like it, don't do it. If everyone followed that idea rather than trying to ban anything they don't like, the world would be a much better place!"

"You mean like laws against gays?"

"As just one example. But trying to ban books, or movies, or any other way people want to express themselves or entertain themselves. There are WAY too many people in prison for victimless crimes like drug possession. They should be offered counseling and treatment if they want it, not locked in prison."

"What about making them? Or selling them?"

"The War on Drugs has been a complete failure, except in terms of locking up a lot of young black and Hispanic men. No matter how tough the government makes the drug laws, people want them, so they'll find a way to get them. We should have learned that lesson with prohibition. Banning alcohol led to illegal

production and distribution, and escalating violence to control territory. Sound familiar?"

"I guess I hadn't thought about that."

"They gloss over it in history classes," I replied. "And they focus on the violence, not the cause of the violence. Prostitution has been illegal for a long, long time, and you can still easily find a prostitute! All you have to do it go on Craigslist and you can see what are obvious ads from prostitutes in addition to people looking for dates."

"They advertise openly?" Ebele asked.

"In code words," I replied. "I look at it for amusement at times, not that I'd go to a prostitute."

"But you think it should be legal?"

"I think you can't stop it, so it's better to handle it like Nevada, where it's legal, regulated, and with appropriate medical certificates. You know, kind of like the one you showed me earlier."

"I guess it just seems wrong."

"Then you don't do it!" I replied. "That's exactly the point! I'm sure there was stuff in Doctor Bethany's book that you think is weird or gross and wouldn't do. And that's fine for you, but it's not fine for you to tell anyone else not to do it."

"My pastor wants more laws made to ban vice," she said.

"The laws we currently have don't stop it, so why does he think MORE laws will stop it?"

"I don't know."

"It's something to think about."

We arrived at the ice rink and Ebele went to the stands while I went into the locker room. I was very happy a few minutes later when Nicholas came in. He'd told me he was cleared to play, but I knew things could change right up to the last minute, especially if he'd woke up with a headache.

"Ready to play, Evans?" Coach asked him.

"Yes, Coach!" he replied.

The players in the locker room all cheered, as we'd need him today against British International. The kid who'd hit Nicholas had been suspended for the remainder of the season, but hadn't been banned, as it was his first offense. A season-long ban for a Junior was bad, but not nearly so bad as it would have been if he'd been a Senior and college scouts were looking for recruits.

There might be college scouts in attendance now, but they were basically forbidden from even speaking to anyone who wasn't a Senior, and there were all kinds of bizarre rules both they and players had to follow to be eligible to play in the NCAA. The one that might cause me trouble was that any kind of support from outside your family made you ineligible, and because the government didn't recognize my moms marriage, some idiot could point to that and say that Mom Two providing rides to hockey and helping pay for it made me ineligible.

I'd discussed it with Dad and Liz, and neither of them thought that would happen, but it was possible. I'd pretty much decided to play for the club team at UW Madison and focus on getting my degree, rather than playing for the NCAA team. To me, it made more sense, given all the travel necessary for playing on the

NCAA team. The club team mostly played teams in Wisconsin and Minnesota, which was much easier than, say, going to Boston to play BC, or to Maine, to play the University of Maine.

Coach gave his usual strategy and pep talk, then we hit the ice to warm up. That gave us our first look at the players from the British International School. I couldn't watch too closely, but they were similar to us in overall size and speed, and their shots seemed accurate, though with no defender, that really didn't provide a good idea of how well they'd do in game conditions.

"What do you think?" Mike, one of our starting defensemen, asked towards the end of warmups.

"That we need to bring our A+ game today. These guys are competing for top of the league table with us and St. Rita. You know the drill -- stay in your area, cut off the passing lanes, get up the ice quickly on offense, and let me worry about stopping shots. You know I can stone most guys one-on-one, so it really is a matter of taking away the passing lanes."

"We got your back!" Mike declared.

"Well, given you usually face the other way, I think I have YOUR back!"

"You're a nut, Jesse!"

"I know," I grinned.

The horn sounded, and we all skated over to the bench for final instructions, and two minutes later, the referee blew his whistle, visually checked with me and the opposing goalie, then dropped the puck to start the game. The British International center won the face-off, and they set up for an attack, which we fended off without a shot. The same happened when we advanced the puck,

with a board battle in the corner resulting in another change of possession. The entire first period was a total defensive struggle, with only five shots total, three for them and two for us, and none of them very good.

When the horn sounded to end the period, we headed into the locker room to rest and rehydrate.

"It looks as if we both adopted the same game strategy," Coach Nelson said. "The question is, do we change it up, or keep playing defensive hockey?"

"I think they're going to change," I said. "So if we play solid defense, we should get our chances when they push too hard. We have some very fast forwards and should be able to generate odd-man rushes."

"Yeah, but they'll get more shots that way," Nicholas observed.

"Jesse is a stone wall!" Mike countered. "And they haven't had any quality shots."

"Neither have we," Freddy declared. "But I think we can play our defensive game for one more period. We can always change schemes midway through the period if we need to. It really is mostly just a matter of how far up ice we come and if we stay on the blue line or attack. The forwards will be doing their thing either way."

"Let's make a slight adjustment," Coach said. "D, you can cheat the line a bit, but no deeper than the tops of the circles, but only on the weak side, or if you have a chance to grab a loose puck. That way we can always get one man back to take away passing lanes in a two-man break."

We all changed our t-shirts, drank bottles of water, and then put on our jerseys and headed for the ice for a brief warmup skate. Once the referee dropped the puck, it was clear that my suggestion that British International would change things up was correct, in that they were much more aggressive and their D-men

were pushing hard, including skating as deep as the face-off dots to my right and left.

That allowed them more chances at scoring, but also left them vulnerable to breakaways, which finally happened with about four minutes left in the period when Nicholas stole a pass and had clear ice between him and the British International goalie. Just as he pulled his stick back for a shot, he was hooked, but managed to get off a weak shot, which was turned away by the goalie, but the referee's arm was up, signaling a penalty.

In my mind, it was a breakaway and should have resulted in a penalty shot, but when the referee awarded a powerplay, I was actually happy, as that gave us two minutes to try to score, rather than an all-or-nothing penalty shot against a goalie who looked to be my equal. The British International defenseman, who was on their first line, skated to the penalty box and we set up for a powerplay with an aggressive four-forward, one-defenseman lineup.

Coach put Freddy out as the lone D, as he was the best shooter, along with our usual powerplay team of Tom, Jack, and Steve, with Nicholas being the fourth forward. I liked our chances, and things looked really good as we controlled the puck and had a full minute in their zone, getting off three shots before they managed to clear.

I skated out aggressively and played the puck to Mike, who had come on for Freddy, and he skated the puck in, followed by four fresh forwards, while British International had only managed to change two players because of my aggressive play. We set up again and after a series of passes, Mike fired a one-timer at the British International keeper who gave up a rebound which was tapped in by Steve to give us a 1-0 lead which we held until the end of the second period.

The third period, British International pulled out all the stops, and managed to get their own power-play goal after Tom was called for tripping while trying to

play a puck which was between the skates of a British International defenseman. It was one of those questionable calls that always infuriated me when they went against us, but arguing and complaining would do not good.

Their goal came when I blocked a shot, the puck went up in the air and the British International forward timed it perfectly, batting it past me as soon as it was below shoulder-level. It was something I hadn't expected, and he beat me, as Mike Lange would have said, like a rented mule.

"That was a high stick," DeShawn complained as we set up for the faceoff.

I shook my head, "He waited exactly the right amount of time. The puck was chest high, and that's legal."

"Oh, sure, spoil my righteous outrage!" he growled.

"Just pretend it's Friday night and score!" I chuckled, because DeShawn had a reputation as a real ladies' man.

I had to keep from laughing harder because he was a perfect example of it being 'twue what they say about bwack men'. I didn't usually pay attention, but he was, literally, hung like a horse, and every single guy in the locker room was in awe. Despite my comment to Ebele earlier, I was no slouch in that regard, but he was HUGE.

"No pretending, Block!" he replied with a grin. "The ladies know where to come for lovin'!"

I laughed, "Focus on the game!"

He tapped me with his stick and moved to his position. Once again the ref dropped the puck and the game became a series of sprints up and down the ice,

with neither team playing meaningful defense. With just under a minute to go, Nicholas became the hero, scoring on a wrist shot from the face-off circle through a screen of four players. There was just no way for the goalie to see the puck, and it went right by his blocker.

We won the ensuing face off and ran the clock down, not even giving British International a chance to pull their goalie. When the final horn sounded, we lined up, had our usual handshake line, then headed for the locker room for showers.

XXXI. Talented Tongues

October 5, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"OK to violate protocol?" Lieutenant Commander Nomura asked on Saturday evening.

"You want to play with the boys?" I asked with a grin.

"If it's a choice between the club the girls are going to and poker, poker wins, hands down!" she declared.

"So does Steve!" Mike Knox declared. "Unfortunately."

"Not every time," I protested.

"We've had fifteen tournaments in the past year where Steve played," Aaron said.

"Steve has won eight, nobody else has won more than one of those fifteen."

"So, what you're saying," I said with a grin, "is that seven people have beaten me over the past year."

"Stow it, Adams!" Karl ordered.

I laughed, "I'm not one of your sailors, and you actually don't have any sailors, because you're a big-time attorney at Winston & Strawn!"

"Stow it, Adams!" Aaron ordered.

"You need to work on your 'CPO' or 'Drill Sargent' voice," I chuckled.

"Steve is a walking UCMJ violation!" Lieutenant Commander Nomura declared mirthfully. "The chances he'd submit to military discipline are ZERO!"

"The Lieutenant Commander is correct," I said with a grin.

"Are we going to play cards or yack?" Jesse asked, trying to sound annoyed.

"Careful, or you'll be a plucked duck!" I threatened.

"Bring it, Penguin!"

The assembled men and Lieutenant Commander Nomura all laughed, and we sat down to begin our tournament.

"How did you become so skilled at poker?" Roman Alonso, Luna's father, asked.

I smiled, "I've made a life out of readin' people's faces, and knowin' what the cards were by the way they held their eyes."

"Somebody shoot me now, please!" Jesse exclaimed from the other table.

"He's not wrong," Terry countered. "That is the key skill."

"I know!" Jesse exclaimed. "It was the Kenny Rogers lyrics I was objecting to!"

"It's also a matter of knowing the odds and having a very good grasp of expected value," I said. "That is, is the bet 'worth it' in terms of the implied odds and the size of the pot?"

"And you do all that quickly enough to act on it?"

"That's why the man wins," Karl declared. "He can analyze the information available quickly and synthesize a response. As I like to say, he'd have made a very good lawyer."

"You wound me!" I protested.

"If only that kind of insult put him on tilt!" Mike Knox said, shaking his head.

"Good luck with THAT," Jamie declared.

"SHUFFLE UP AND DEAL!" I called out to start the tournament.

 Birgit

"It's totally cool that your dad agreed we could take pictures of their poker tournament," Bob said as he put a fresh roll of film into his camera. "But what's with the girl?"

"Navy Lieutenant Commander Nomura? She prefers poker, whisky, and cigars to going to the jazz club! She has special dispensation from Dad to play with the boys."

"Is she any good?"

"You don't need a dick to play poker!" I protested.

"Well, you do to 'poke her'," Bob retorted with a smirk as he snapped a picture of Lieutenant Commander Nomura.

"In your dreams!" I teased. "She's about thirty!"

"You have heard of Mrs. Robinson, right? And Japanese girls are really cute!"

"Jesse dated a girl from Japan who was here as an exchange student. He's thinking of visiting her in Japan next Summer. I might go to Japan to visit Yuriko and meet my dad's friend Sakurako."

"Yuriko is the Japanese girl who's basically living here, right? And is one of your dad's girlfriends?"

"Yes. The other girl is the wife of the master of our karate school, but Dad met her when she was a teenager on his trip to Japan to study at the principal dojo of our school."

"Would you study there?"

"It's not allowed because of Japanese traditions. But they don't enforce those traditions here, and there's a dojo of our school in Wisconsin run by a girl who's a 5th Dan black belt."

"Does that upset you?"

"No. As Dad says, the Japanese have the right to run their country the way they see fit, just as we do, and until we get our shit together, we aren't in any position to tell them what to do without being totally hypocritical. It's a 'people who live in glass houses' thing, or if you believe the Bible, taking the log out of your own eye so you are able to see clearly to remove the splinter from your neighbor's eye."

"Isn't that good advice, even if you don't believe in God?"

"Absolutely, but it, along with 'do unto others as you would have them do until you' comes with so much baggage, it's not worth it."

"So you'll do that, then?" Bob asked with a smirk as he snapped a picture of Dad.

I laughed, "I actually LIKE doing that, so I'll do it even if you don't reciprocate!"

"From what I hear, most girls don't like doing it."

"I'm not most girls, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"I noticed!" Bob declared. "I was just stating what I hear about the general case!"

"My friends don't think that, for the most part."

"Remember when I said I wanted to hang out with the Girl Gang?" Bob asked with a smirk as he took a snapshot of three of the Navy men.

I laughed, "And you expect the Girl Gang is going to service you in that fashion?"

"Expect? No, but a boy can have fantasies, right?"

"I think my reality will trump your fantasy!" I declared.

"If that's a challenge, I accept!" Bob declared.

 Jesse

"Explain what happened, please," Roman asked when Dad was knocked out in fourth place.

"He played the odds correctly," I interjected. "Two hands ago, he got all his money in with the best of it, just short of the nuts. He was beat by runner Jacks."

"So he IS a man beaten by Jacks?" Lieutenant Commander Nomura asked with a silly smile.

"Sorry, what?" Roman asked.

"It's from the movie *Rounders*," Dad said. "After a guy loses a hand he should have never played, he's asked by a friend 'Does he look like a man beaten by Jacks?'. The implication is that he had judged poorly. As for what Jesse said, I could only be beaten by runner-runner Jacks, so the odds were heavily in my favor. That was a textbook definition of a 'bad beat', as Karl should never have made the bet he did."

"He was trying to push you off what he thought was a weak hand," I observed. "And given how tight you play, that works most of the time. The weird part about tonight is that you, Terry, Mike, and I are all out in fourth or worse. It happens."

"Listen to who's become mellow in their old age!" Dad teased. "It used to drive you nuts!"

"And it's a VERY short drive for the Adams men!" Doctor Al declared, causing everyone, including Dad and me, to laugh.

"And we pick up the trauma surgeons just before we get there!" Dad responded, causing more laughter.

"I'll be sure to let Jess know you said so!" Al replied.

"Jess has never denied being crazy!" Dad countered.

"She married you, so there is no way she could!" Kurt smirked, once again causing laughter.

"Let's play some cards!" Karl growled. "I'm going to win!"

"Don't be so sure, Captain!" Lieutenant Commander Nomura said with a sly smile.

Her words proved prescient, and she won the tournament about fifteen minutes later, knocking out one of Dad's new employees, Larry Jefferson, and then Karl.



October 6, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"What's your plan for Cincinnati for next weekend?" Jessica asked as Kara, Suzanne, and I walked her to the hospital on Sunday morning.

"I have tickets to fly down on Friday morning and back on Sunday afternoon. Besides the opening of the Marble Palace, I'll see my dad, my lawyer friends, and Joyce and her family."

"Do you have a date for Friday night?" Kara asked.

"Anthony's niece, Aurora," I replied. "We'll be going in period costumes. I'm picking up my navy blue pinstripe double-breasted suit and a new fedora tomorrow. She'll be wearing a black 'flapper' dress."

"That should be our costume theme for Halloween," Kara declared. "We should all get 'flapper' dresses! We can be Steve's gun molls!"

"And we should get toy Tommy guns!" Suzanne declared.

"I'll leave all of that up to you three," I said. "I'm happy to get more use out of the suit."

"I saw you crossed Katelyn's name off the calendar for this week," Jessica said.

"The guy who asked her to the Fall dance wanted to start going out, and she decided she liked him enough to suspend our Monday trysts. That doesn't really surprise me, as it was mostly about sex, and she wasn't all that interested in Philosophy Club. To be honest, I'd much rather spend time with Natalie or Yuriko."

"You've really dialed it back," Kara said. "Are you happy?"

"Very," I replied. "And you know opportunities continue to present themselves!"

"Now, if I could just meet the right girl for MY opportunity!" Kara grouched.

"I hate to say this," Jessica observed, "but it's going to be more and more difficult to fulfill that very specific fantasy."

"Oh, I know," Kara sighed. "But I'm hopeful!"

We reached the hospital, Kara, Suzanne, and I each kissed Jessica, and after she'd gone inside, we turned for home.

 Birgit

"Thanks for allowing us to take pictures last night," I said after I snuggled close to Dad in the chaise.

"You seem to be enjoying your photography club and your new friend."

"Bob is totally cool and mellow, which makes it easy to hang out with him."

"So opposite of you?" Dad teased.

"HEY!" I protested. "I'm easy to hang out with!"

"You are the least mellow person in this family, except for your mom the trauma surgeon!"

"Wait! You think *Albert* is more mellow than I am?"

"Albert doesn't suffer from the effects of the Law of Constant Outrage the way you do!"

"If people weren't so fucking stupid, I wouldn't be outraged all the time!" I protested.

"And do you think society is going to suddenly get its head out of its butt and come to its senses?"

"No," I admitted.

"Then you either need to be prepared to go through life with your outrage meter pegged or mellow about things over which you have no control. It took me a LONG time to learn that lesson, and I'm still trying to put it into practice. Remember our talk after the DCFS lady was here with the detective."

"I remember. It's just difficult, Dad!"

"Being an adult isn't all it's cracked up to be, is it?"

"You've told us that since we were little and none of us believed you until we were old enough to experience it."

"Better you've learned that now than when you graduate from college the way it seems happens with most kids these days. We see that in new graduates applying for positions at NIKA."

"I don't know how my moms handle teaching! Kids are SO dumb these days!"

"The Navy men say the same thing about new recruits. That's why I have Philosophy Club and you and Jesse have Hangouts -- to try to build a cadre of people who are able to think critically and call out the BS when we see it. Sadly, we're treated the same way Casandra and John the Baptist were. But back to Photography Club, are you satisfied with your progress?"

"I'm having fun and Bob thinks I'm doing a good job, and so does Mr. Tavares, so I think so. Some of our pictures will be used in the Yearbook, and my goal is to get at least two selected."

"That's a good goal. And I see that impish smile, young lady!"

"Not THOSE kinds of pictures, Dad! Those would be private!"

"And you remember our discussion about that."

"Society sucks!" I griped.

"And all we can do is try to make our little part of the world better."

"By sucking?" I teased.

"Birgit Elizabeth!" Dad said, trying to sound as if he was reprimanding me, but failing miserably.

"What?" I asked innocently.

"You are the last person who can pull off the 'innocent me' bit!"

"Maybe!" I giggled. "But going back to making parts of the world better, I was thinking more about Yuriko's invitation to visit, and I might do it if Jesse goes to visit Akiko."

Dad laughed, "And you going to Japan makes it better?"

"Duh!"

"You know you're welcome to make a trip like that," Dad said, though Jesse has to work around his hockey camp, and he committed to teach a two-week session as well."

"I know. What I was thinking was that if I did, we'd fly to Japan with Yuriko, and be back before Jesse had to go to Minnesota. Would I still be able to visit Katy?"

"If you can manage without Dad cuddles for all that time you'll be away."

"It'll be good practice for when I'm an exchange student!" I declared.

"A very different tune than the one you've been singing for years," Dad observed.

He was right, but as much as I liked and needed my cuddles, I needed to do other things, too.

"I still love you, Dad!" I declared.

"Obviously, but you're also maturing and your needs are different from when you were little.

"I'll say!" I giggled.

"Besides that, Pumpkin!"

"Breakfast!" Yuriko announced.

"We'll be right there," Dad replied.

He tightened his arms around me and held me tight for the full three minutes before we went to have breakfast.

 Jesse

My phone rang just as I was leaving church early on Sunday afternoon.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Hi, Jesse! It's Viktoria! What are you doing right now?"

"Leaving church. What are you doing?"

"I'm home all alone and need some attention!"

"Where are your parents?"

"They're at a birthday banquet for Father Basil. They won't be home until after 9:00pm! Come over, Jesse! I need you!"

"And if they were to come home early?"

"That won't happen!" Viktoria declared.

"You can't be sure of that," I countered, "and I guarantee that if your dad finds me in your house, he'll call the cops!"

"But I'll say I wanted to!" she protested.

"Which won't matter because you aren't seventeen, and Illinois says you can't consent until you're seventeen. Mostly they leave High School kids alone, but if a parent were to make a complaint, it could cause all kinds of trouble with the police and DCFS."

"But I want to see you!" she whined.

"I'm OK with picking you up and going somewhere, but not staying at your house."

"Could we go to your house?"

"We could, but we'd only have a few hours together."

"I guess that's better than nothing," Viktoria said, sounding unhappy.

"You can't be foolish about this," I said. "You know how angry your dad would be."

"I know. Come pick me up."

I didn't have any plans, and Viktoria, despite being a bit whiney, was fun and enthusiastic in bed, not to mention being smoking hot. And I wasn't having nearly as much sex as I had been, mostly because I'd tried to avoid the girls on the cheerleading squad and softball teams, with the exception of Estefana and Ebele. There was just too much potential drama because the parents had freaked out over the 'naked sauna' and had discovered the V-Card contest.

"OK," I said. "What time do you need to be home?"

"Any time before 8:30pm is OK."

"The problem is that I'll either need to have you home by 4:30pm, or get permission for you to join our family dinner. I can't miss."

"I thought your dad gave you freedom!"

"He does. I don't *want* to miss."

"Even for more time with me?" she asked sexily.

"Even for more time with you," I confirmed.

"You can't be serious!"

"I am. Our family meals are important, and it's often the only time I get to see my brothers Matthew and Michael because they live in the burbs."

"And you'd rather do that than have sex?"

"I'd rather do both! And we can. If you don't want to, just let me know."

"You're being mean!"

"No, I'm letting you know that I'm happy to do what you want, but you have to acknowledge that I have needs besides sex, and be happy to let me do what I want as well. It goes both ways. And remember, *you* called *me*."

"Why are you being like this?"

"I'm simply telling you what I want to do. You have to decide what you want to do. If we can't agree, then we don't do it. That's the mature, adult way to handle things."

"Sorry," Viktoria said. "Come get me, please. Dinner is OK, if your dad agrees."

"See you in forty minutes."

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Excellent work these last four days," Mr. Fruits said backstage after our final performance. "As our usual practice, stage strike is tomorrow after school, and, as usual, I expect everyone here, not just stagehands. Our next performance is our Winter Pageant, which runs from December 12th through the 15th. We'll sing traditional Christmas carols and perform scenes from famous Christmas shows, especially those of Rankin/Bass. I will have scripts, libretto, and music on Tuesday. That's all! See you tomorrow!"

I left with everyone else and walked to my mom's car, where Chelsea was waiting for me.

"Great job again, Matt!"

"Thanks! Home so I can change and then to Maggie's for the party?"

"Yes. I have our contribution of food and cold drinks in coolers in the trunk, so all you'll need to do is run inside, change, and come back out."

"Remember, we're leaving at 5:00pm so we can get to my dad's house for our family dinner. Maggie knows, and the party only runs until 6:00pm, anyway."

"May I say it's a lame party?"

"You may, but it's one Maggie is allowed to attend, and given mom and Eduardo talked her parents off the ledge about drama, nobody is complaining about the party. And, to be honest, I prefer not having wild cast parties like some of the ones in the past."

"When girls propositioned you?"

"Not just at parties," I replied. "And you know how I've responded."

"I do. I'm sorry I've been insecure. It's just, well, you know what's happened to several of my friends."

"I do, but I think you should take Pavel and Larisa as your model. They're very much like us, in that they've known each other since they were little and never dated anyone else."

"True," Chelsea said. "I guess I focus too much on the negatives."

"I'd say cheating is pretty dramatic, so it's no surprise that your friends were really hurt and that you felt badly for them. Just focus on the positive, and think about the kids and grandkids we're going to have!"

Chelsea laughed, "I think I can wait to be a mom until after I finish my degree!"

"But until then, lots of practice, right?"

"Obviously!"

 Birgit

Tiffany, Lilibeth, Hannah, Fangsu, and I had all gone into the city for lunch with Rachel at Samantha's condo. After lunch, we headed to North Michigan Avenue to do some window shopping, including checking out American Girl and FAO Schwarz. And, of course, we ended up at Oberweis for ice cream.

"I think I need to start exercising," Hannah said. "I gained three pounds in the last two weeks!"

"All in your boobs!" Tiffany groused. "They're huge compared to mine!"

I almost said that was a good thing given my dad liked small boobs, but I knew I couldn't say that in this group, though I could possibly say it privately to Tiffany.

"Your mom's are decent," Hannah said. "You're only fourteen, so they can get bigger."

"You're only fourteen and YOURS are bigger!" Tiffany protested. "And boys drool over big boobs."

"Boys are dumb," I said. "Who cares what they think? And we can always get even by hinting that their dicks are small! That drives them absolutely to distraction!"

All the girls laughed.

"Size isn't that important," Rachel said. "Skill is WAY more important! Especially tongues!"

"That's for sure!" Lilibeth confirmed.

"But you'll never experience a dick if what you've said remains true," Rachel countered.

"And I don't want to!" Lilibeth declared. "I was simply confirming that a talented tongue is *heavenly!*"

"I actually cum easier from Javon's tongue," Rachel observed. "And that's mentioned in Doctor Bethany's book -- clitoral stimulation is often necessary."

"See, there's your problem!" Lilibeth declared with a smirk. "When the guy is only interested in getting his dick into you, your clit isn't going to be stimulated as well as with a tongue!"

"Let's talk about something other than sex!" Tiffany exclaimed.

"Getting hot and bothered?" Hannah asked.

"Duh!" Tiffany responded. "Rachel, is everything set for starting college?"

"Yes. I'm registered for all my classes and the apartment is ready and waiting. Javon is already at Chicago Theological Seminary, and we'll move in together as soon as I turn eighteen. I technically could do it now, but I'd rather not attract any attention."

"What happened?" Fangsu asked.

Rachel gave an abbreviated version of the story that had led to her living with Samantha, leaving out my dad's involvement, and just saying she was eventually kicked out by her mom for having sex.

"What are you studying in college?" Fangsu asked Rachel.

"I've considered a number of options and settled on business, and then I'll get a Master's in Public Administration."

"So work for the government?" I asked.

"Probably a local government," Rachel said. "Similar to Jesse's Mom Two, who is a civil engineer, but I'd be on the planning and management side, instead of being an engineer or whatever. Government is not the enemy!"

"It is from where I sit!" I declared.

"Your situation might be unique!" Rachel declared.

"Not as unique as you might think," I replied. "It's all about wanting to be left alone and agreeing to leave other people alone. None of us object to roads, schools, fire protection, and so on. We object to busybodies who want to interfere in our lives in ways that simply are none of their business! You don't like the laws about having sex any more than I do, and you and I agree that abortion is a private choice, and nobody should have ANY say other than the pregnant woman, her doctor, and if she wants to include him, the father."

"Would you have an abortion if you got pregnant?" Fangsu asked.

"Probably," I replied. "But I'd sit down with my dad, my moms, Katy, and Aunt Jennifer and discuss it, and talk to my gynecologist. I'd listen to their opinions and advice, then decide what to do."

"But not the boy?"

"Not the boy," I said firmly. "If I decided to keep the baby, which is unlikely, then I'd obviously tell him and he'd be responsible for child support. But having it or not is totally up to me, and nobody else should interfere."

"I agree," Tiffany said. "Absolutely. It has to be the girl's decision, not the government's or anyone else's."

"I hate to say this," I said, "but I need to head home soon, so I'm not late for our weekly family dinner."

"I'll go with you," Fangsu said. "I need to be home about the same time."

Tiffany, Hannah, and Lilibeth decided to stay at Rachel's, so Fangsu and I said 'goodbye' and headed for the Loop.

 Jesse

"After dinner, we usually all use the sauna," I said to Viktoria as we showered after fooling around for just over two hours.

"I haven't been in there before, but that sounds OK to me."

"We use the sauna naked," I said as I soaped her sexy boobs.

"Wait! With your sisters? And your moms and dad?"

"And my cousins who are staying in the main house while their mom is on her honeymoon."

And I was reasonably sure Aunt Stephanie would be at dinner, as her flight was supposed to have arrived this morning. It would be interesting to see if she joined us in the sauna, because, according to Dad, Joel had been a bit uncomfortable with the idea.

"NO WAY!" she gasped.

"Absolutely true."

"But your dad and brothers would see me naked!" she protested.

And normally, I'd have made the point about 'Weekend rules', but in this case, I felt it was better to give Viktoria the option of joining us in the sauna or taking her home. That way, it wouldn't cause the rest of the family to need bathing suits or towels.

"That's true. We can skip and I can take you home."

"You're the only person to have ever seen me naked!"

"So?"

"And you're OK with other people seeing me naked?"

"In our family, we understand that nudity does not imply sex, and that we shouldn't be ashamed of our bodies. Remember, Adam and Eve didn't even concern themselves with being naked until *after* the Fall."

"I don't know."

"Well, you have about ninety minutes to decide, and if you don't feel comfortable, I'll take you home. We'd need to leave right after the sauna, anyway, to get you home before your parents arrive. We'll be cutting it close as it is."

We finished our shower, dried off, wrapped towels around us, and went to my room to dress. Once we were dressed, we headed to the main house. A few minutes later, Aunt Stephanie and her new husband, Joel, arrived, and not long after them, Aunt Elyse, Eduardo, my brothers, and Chelsea. With everyone at the house, Yuriko, Albert, and Stephie brought everything from the kitchen and we sat down to eat, and I introduced Viktoria to everyone she hadn't met.

When we finished eating, Viktoria and I helped Birgit clear the table while Dad, Matthew, and Chelsea washed dishes.

"I think I should just go home," Viktoria said when we finished clearing the table.

"OK," I replied. "Let me just tell my dad and we'll head out."

 Steve

"So, how was Monaco?" I asked my sister as the entire family, except for Jesse and his guest, sat in the sauna.

"Great! We visited Nice and took a trip to Malta as well. You'll appreciate that Joel won some money at the casino playing Baccarat."

"In true Bond fashion," I chuckled. "But I don't see him in a tuxedo!"

"Not even for my wedding!" Joel declared. "The casino does have a dress code, though they don't require a tux."

"Big Brother, I checked my email when we arrived home. Why didn't someone call me about the audits?"

"And wreck your honeymoon?" I asked. "Elyse and Liz had it completely under control. Barbara is aware, but she wisely left it to the experts at McCarthy / Jenkins to advise Elyse and Liz on how to proceed. You can get as involved as you want tomorrow morning."

"Thanks for not having anyone call her, Steve," Joel said. "I appreciate it!"

"You're back to work tomorrow?"

"Yes. We have a big job starting first thing in the morning. We're subcontracted to Brown Construction. Playing poker with him a few months ago turned out profitable for both of us, even though neither of us won any money in the tournament."

"That is part of the point of Guys' Night," I replied. "I'm glad that worked out."

When we finished our sauna, my wives and I showered, then came back downstairs to say 'goodbye' to everyone who was leaving. Once they left, Birgit had her cuddle time, then the kids went to bed and my wives and I went to the 'Indian' room to relax together until bedtime.



October 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Tuesday afternoon, Fangsu came to the house after school, because Peter had soccer practice. It was usually on Mondays and Wednesdays, but had been switched because they had a game on Wednesday. I'd see him on Thursday, and Julie planned to join us again, though she was still unsure how much she would do.

"What do you do to stay fit besides karate?" Fangsu asked.

"I run with my dad and Suzanne five or six times a week in the mornings before school. You don't exercise, do you?"

"No, but my doctor said I should, even though I'm thin."

"Obesity is just one risk factor for bad health," I replied. "Sitting on your butt all the time doing math problems is certainly one!"

Fangsu laughed, "My doctor said 'being sedentary', but I like your way of saying it better! Where do you run?"

"Washington Park. You could probably join us if you wanted, though you'd need to run some before you tried so you could keep up."

"I don't want to run alone, though," she replied.

I considered the options and decided to offer to run with her.

"I could run with you to start with, then when you're ready, we could run with my dad and Suzanne."

"You'd be OK with that? You and your dad are really close."

"We are," I replied. "But I can do that. I have time with Dad every morning after we run, but before breakfast."

"Do your sisters get the same amount of time with him?"

"They don't want it or need it the way I do. And my brothers think they're too cool to need parents, especially moms!"

Fangsu laughed, "I've heard you say things that make it clear you believe the same thing about your moms!"

"Maybe," I admitted with a silly smile. "Should we do homework?"

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"I want to be a dentist!" Matt W said with a smirk.

"You knew that scene had to be in the pageant," I said. "Along with 'bumbles bounce' and 'Happy birthday!'"

"I actually prefer the vignette from *It's a Wonderful Life*," Maggie said.

"I'm just happy all my favorite songs are included," Nick declared.

"Are we actually allowed to sing religious songs?" Tara asked.

"Yes," Maggie replied. "The school has to be neutral with regard to the content of the songs. They can, generally, only stop things which have inappropriate content for minors. The school's goal isn't to endorse religion, nor to disparage it, and the main focus of the pageant is secular."

"And to think she hasn't even been to law school yet!" I chuckled.

"I could say more!" Maggie replied. "There was a specific case in 1980 that permitted religious Christmas music because it is a part of our national heritage, and is played in many venues like stores, on the radio, on television, and so on. The key thing about the case, which directly applies, is that the religious songs are interspersed with secular songs, such as *Rudolph*, *Frosty*, *Winter Wonderland*, *Jingle Bells*, *Let it Snow* and so on. There's also a tradition in our district of including some religious songs in Winter pageants or concerts."

"What she said!" I declared.

"OK, everyone!" Mr. Fruits called out, clapping his hands for attention. "We're going to start with the choral numbers. We'll work on the solos and the vignette scenes starting next week. We'll have three practices a week for October and the first two weeks in November, then four per week for the four weeks between then and the first performance, which is on December 12th. Take out your sheet music, and we'll start with *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, which will be sung in parts."

We pulled out our sheet music, and Mr. Fruits started a CD of instrumental music for *The Twelve Days of Christmas*."



October 10, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Thursday, I hurried home because Peter was coming over after school, and it had been a week since I'd had sex. My personal massager helped, but it was not as good as having a partner! Julie was join us as well, and I was reasonably sure

she'd go further than the previous time, but I wasn't sure we'd have a full threesome.

That made me wonder if it would be possible to have two guys with me. Rachel had managed it, but I wasn't sure Peter would go for it, and I had no clue about Bob or Philip, and given I hadn't even kissed either of them in a serious way, I was probably getting ahead of myself.

Sex was fun, and I wanted to have a lot of it, but I kept hearing Dad remind me about being responsible and never pushing anyone to do something before they were ready. Figuring that out was way harder than I'd expected, just as being an adult was way harder than I'd expected. Fortunately I had people like Katy, Dad, and even Mom to help.

I reproved myself for thinking that about Mom, because she really wasn't that bad. Dad was right that because I had so much freedom, little things bugged me because there were really no big things to fight about. What I had also discovered was that pushing back in a respectful way was actually helpful, whereas pushing back hard actually hurt my case, proving Ashley right in that being subtle and circumspect was more effective than being brash and outspoken.

Julie arrived, interrupting my thoughts, and we had some time to talk before Peter arrived, because he was coming from his Catholic school, and took the bus, whereas Julie and I both walked to and from our schools.

"Before Peter arrives, you should decide how far you want to go," I said.

"You're really looking out for me," Julie observed.

"I don't want you to regret anything," I replied. "And you know how excited you said you felt last week."

"I was so nervous!"

"Believe it or not, so was I," I replied. "It's normal."

"I, uhm, want you and Peter to lick me," Julie said quietly, blushing slightly.

"And I'll, uhm, suck him."

I decided I had to tease her just a bit.

"And me?" I asked. "Do I just get to watch?!"

"We can lick each other, like you offered," Julie replied.

And now I had to be serious, to make sure I hadn't just pressured her.

"If you want to," I replied. "I was teasing a bit."

Julie nodded, "I know. I, uhm, really, really want to do that with you. I'm not so sure about Peter and what happens, you know."

"You mean cumming in your mouth? And swallowing?"

"Yeah. What's it like?"

"You tasted it," I replied. "It's not bad. And I think it's cool when it pulses in my mouth. It's also super powerful for the girl."

"Wait! What?"

"Teeth," I giggled.

"OUCH!" Julie exclaimed. "You'd do that?"

"No, but think about it from a guy's perspective. He wants his dick in your mouth so badly he's willing to risk you biting it off!"

Julie laughed, "I never thought about it that way!"

"Most boys probably don't, so you remind them with just a bit of pressure from your teeth!"

"You do that?"

"Playfully, but it makes the point! And you know girls are totally in control because guys want to have sex so badly, they'll do just about anything to get it!"

"SO true!" Julie said, shaking her head. "But so do you, Birgit!"

"Maybe," I giggled. "But, honestly, if a girl tells a guy she wants to fuck, how often is he going to say 'no' compared to the other way around?"

"Good point!"

"And as I said, Peter is totally cool and will be happy with whatever we do."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything?"

"How do you figure out if you like boys or girls?"

"You don't have to figure anything out," I replied. "Just do what *you* want to do, with whomever you want to do it, with the caveat of birth control and STI tests. You'll eventually discover what's best for you. You can get advice from other

people, but in the end, only you can decide. I know people who society would call 'bisexual' who chose a monogamous relationship because that's what best met their needs."

"What about you?"

"I'm positive I prefer boys, but playing around a bit with girls is OK with me, obviously. And I really do want to have a full threesome."

"Would you with two boys?" Julie asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I was thinking about it before and what it would be like to have two guys inside me at the same time."

"Mouth and pussy?"

"Or butt and pussy. Or butt and mouth."

"WHOA! You would do that? I mean, in your butt?"

"I have," I replied. "It was interesting, but it doesn't stimulate the correct parts! That said, a guy in front and back might be totally awesome!"

"I don't know if I could ever do that! I'm nervous enough about losing my virginity."

"One step at a time," I replied. "Just do what you want and what feels right. As I said, I can take care of Peter either way."

"You're the best, Birgit!"

"I know!"

XXXII. I Am Going To Shoot Your Father!

October 11, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I wish our flights lined up," I said to dad on Friday morning as we cuddled after running.

"You have to be in school, and I need to be in Cincinnati before you get out of school."

"I could miss a day and it wouldn't make a bit of difference!" I declared.

"Yes, you could," Dad agreed. "But is that the responsible thing to do when it's not necessary?"

"Define 'necessary'!" I demanded.

Dad laughed, "It does not mean 'whatever the Empress of the Universe demands'!"

"Says you!" I retorted.

"On that topic," Dad said, "are you sure going to New York is the correct decision?"

"No, but it's the one I made," I said. "You've said sometimes you have to make a decision even when you aren't sure."

"Yes, I have, and so long as you've thought it through, that's fine. You've been honest with her?"

"You mean about liking boys? Yes, absolutely."

But I liked sex, a lot, and I'd enjoyed making out with Julie, as had Peter, and she'd let me lick her, but was really hesitant to go further, and I'd made sure neither Peter nor I had pressured her, and he'd been happy with a blowjob and fucking while Julie watched. She was really nervous about the idea of Peter being inside her, but I was pretty sure she'd eventually work her way up to that.

"Just be careful, Pumpkin."

"I will. Do you have a date for the hotel opening?"

"I do. Anthony's niece, Aurora."

"And you're going to christen the hotel?" I asked with a smirk.

"None of your business, nosy daughter!" Dad declared.

"That's a 'yes'," I giggled. "I should be your date!"

"Which would guarantee I didn't help christen the hotel!"

"You're just no fun, Dad!" I declared.

"So you and Penny say!"

"We both love you, Dad!"

"Of that, I'm positive," Dad agreed.

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

I had left the house immediately after breakfast and driven to Midway, where I'd caught my flight to Cincinnati, or rather to Erlanger, Kentucky, where the airport was located, and then rented a car and driven into the city for a lunch with Ben van Hoek, Jocelyn Mills, and Deborah Rice. After lunch, I made a foray into what had formerly been enemy territory, the newly renamed Volstead & Associates.

"I was surprised at the request for a meeting," Franklin Volstead said.

"I don't like having enemies," I replied. "In nearly every case, there is a way forward with mutual benefits, and I like to find those. Consider it making an offer of compromise to obtain a good result for both sides in a dispute. It's also the case that Cindi asked me to make a courtesy call, even though I'm not involved in day-to-day operations."

"I know many attorneys who want nothing to do with being managing partner in a law firm because it takes them away from the law, sometimes completely. Here, we hire an office manager with expertise in law firm administration, and our partners make policy and the office manager implements it, along with handling all the administrative tasks that go with running any corporation."

"The stuff I absolutely hate," I replied. "My sister and Elyse live for that stuff, so I leave it to them!"

"You're still involved in strategic decisions, right?"

"I'm Stephanie's closest advisor, but that doesn't take much time."

"You handled the takedown of the Brauns with aplomb," Franklin Volstead said.
"A deftly executed strategy with perfect results."

"Thanks."

"You'd have made an excellent attorney."

"You don't have to turn around and insult me!"

Franklin Volstead laughed, "A sentiment held by many who chose not to enter law as a career. But your logic and rhetorical skills are exactly the attributes that make a good attorney, along with your grasp of balancing outcomes with costs."

"You've missed the part where I've taken the 'if you give a mouse a cookie' approach to things, and object to settling things which are profoundly wrong, but which the insurance company wants to pay off to prevent some outside chance of losing. But it ends up the same way -- they still lose."

"That is one way to look at it."

"My dad's view is that it's all a cost of doing business," I observed. "I don't agree. Well, that's not true, actually. It *is* a cost of doing business, it's just not a *legitimate* one. The insurance companies should never have begun paying off these suits, because, in the end, that encouraged questionable suits which they settled in turn. Rinse, repeat. And I suspect you agree, at least from your client's perspective, given you aren't a firm of plaintiff's tort attorneys."

"You really struggled to find a way not to say 'ambulance chasers'!"

"Because it's beyond that, it's the questionable tort suits, and I'm sure you encounter them all the time."

"Settling provides a known outcome; jury trials are crapshoots."

"A refrain I hear from attorneys all the time," I replied. "And I acknowledge that. But in trying to open the courthouse door, we've invited in all manner of what amount to bogus lawsuits, many of which are settled to get what you call a 'known outcome'."

"You do have to admit there is value to that."

I smiled and nodded, "There is. I don't calculate the value proposition the same way most people do. If you look only at the short term, then perhaps the expected value is on the side of settling, but if you look at the long-term, overall results, I suggest it is not."

"Let me counter with an argument, if I may."

"You may, of course."

"Do you agree that business requires predictability and consistency?"

"I would say those are vital to being able to plan."

"And that means that in addition to the law being interpreted consistently, it also ought to have predictable outcomes."

"Absolutely."

"Do civil jury trials produce consistent, reliable, and predictable results?"

"Predictably bad," I chuckled. "I get your point, and I understand it, as that is, in effect, my dad's argument when he calls it a 'cost of doing business'. But, in my mind, it accepts a bad result on the off chance of a worse result."

"And you make tradeoffs like that all the time, correct? Sometimes you accept a less than optimal option to prevent a truly bad one."

"Sure, but you base it on the chances of that very bad outcome actually occurring."

"Did you just agree that civil trial outcomes are unpredictable? And if so, you cannot properly judge the *true* risk."

"You sound very much like Liz Crane," I said with a smile. "She makes the same basic argument."

"It's a fundamental principle of advising clients we represent, whether an attorney has hundreds of them, like my firm, or one, like Liz. Our goal is always to prevent the *worst* outcome, while seeking the best."

"Not far off my goal of doing as little harm as possible."

"That's exactly how you should approach the law. In an ideal world, I would agree with you, but we don't live in an ideal world. I'll leave that to college professors and clergymen! You and I have to live in the world as it actually exists, not as we'd like it to be."

"True."

"And that's the value of our Common Law system, by the way. It makes our legal reality consistent from case to case, and I suspect, strongly, you believe overturning precedent should be rare."

"Unless it is clearly wrong," I replied. "*Dred Scott* and *Plessy v. Ferguson* come immediately to mind, though I could reel off a bunch of others."

Franklin Volstead smiled, "The Lochner Era is dead and buried, and you won't get back to it!"

I laughed, "It's not just that, but more egregious things such as *Wickard v. Filburn* and *Reynolds v. Simms*."

"And you object to my comment about making an excellent attorney? Not many laymen would know of those two cases. I'm curious -- *Loving v. Virginia*? *Griswold v. Connecticut*?"

"Yes, and on the latter, I know all about the *Comstock Act*!"

"I rest my case!"

"I'll admit you aren't the first person to say that. OK to change topics and ask how our software is working for you?"

"I would have assumed Cindi filled you in before you set the meeting."

"She did, but sometimes people tell different stories depending on who asks."

"It was, for all intents and purposes, a 'drop-in replacement' as Cindi promised it would be. Your two engineers from Pittsburgh did a great job of performing the conversion over the weekend and we had no downtime at all. Training needs were minimal because the screens were configured to match the old system. In addition, our overall licensing fees are lower, because we opted for the non-Microsoft servers. Support has been excellent, as well, so overall, I'd call it completely successful."

I smiled, "That is what I like to hear."

Our brief meeting concluded, and I left his office and walked back to van Hoek, Mills, and Rice so I could change out of my business suit and into my new 'gangster' attire.

"That's just awesome!" Deborah said, seeing me come out of the lavishly appointed men's room.

"Thanks. I figured I should do my best to fit the theme."

"Do you have a gun moll lined up?"

"I do. Anthony's niece, who I met on a previous trip."

Deborah laughed, "Of course! Have fun! And it was good to see you!"

"You, too!"

I left the office and walked to my rental car for the drive across the Ohio River to Newport, where the Marble Palace was located. Anthony had reserved one of the two larger suites for my use, as he had gone with the 'two penthouse' option we'd discussed. One of those penthouses had been reserved for a year by a Cincinnati Reds player who had been traded from the West Coast for his and his family's use.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Adams," the valet said when I pulled up.

I wondered how he knew, but then saw a set of photos on the valet stand when the attendant filled out the ticket for me and the bellman retrieved my bag from the passenger seat.

"I'll escort you inside, Don Stephen!" the bellman, who looked to be Italian, said.

Anthony was laying it on thick, but it just seemed like the right thing to do.

"Nice suit!" I heard from just to my right.

"Hi, Connie," I said. "Thanks."

"That's a new fedora, too, right?" she asked, indicating the fedora I had in my hand.

"Yes. I always wear black, but white with a navy blue ribbon seemed a better choice with the double-breasted navy blue pinstripe gangster suit! Nice touch having the valet have pictures and the bellman calling me 'Don Stephen'."

"You're the only 'Don'," Connie replied. "But all the VIPs have their photos with the valet and front desk. You'll just need to sign and get your room keys; no credit card imprint is necessary. I wouldn't even make you sign, but local ordinances require it."

"Thanks. Are they old-style warded keys?"

"There are too few possible configurations for them to be secure, so the doors have them, but you also need to insert a keycard before you can turn the warded key. The keycard is reset between each guest."

"I hadn't considered the limits of warded keys, but I'm glad you found a way to use them."

"It's similar to the fake gas lighting, where we used period fixtures, but incandescent bulbs to simulate gas lights."

"Cool."

"If you need anything at all, just ask. Aurora should be here in about an hour."

"Thanks, Connie; I appreciate it."

"You're welcome! This wouldn't have been possible without your investment."

I went to the reception desk, signed for the room, and the clerk handed the bellman a pair of warded keys and a pair of keycards. We walked to the elevator, which had fully modern works, but a classic car, complete with elevator operator, and rode up to the seventh floor, one floor below the two penthouses.

"The locks are a combined electronic and keyed system," the bellman said. "You insert the plastic card into this slot, the light turns green, and then you can turn the key."

He demonstrated.

"Got it," I said. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Do you need any further assistance?"

"No, thank you," I said, pressing a twenty-dollar bill into his hands.

"Thank you, Don Stephen!" he said, then left.

The room was perfectly period with one exception -- the flat screen TV and top-of-the-line stereo system. It had turned out that the plasma TVs had not come down enough in price to put them in all the guest rooms, so they were only in the penthouses and the larger suites. That had been a choice Anthony had made to keep the project within budget, and I'd concurred. TVs were something which

could easily be upgraded in the future as prices came down and technology changed.

There were three phones in the suite, two for 'show' which had rotary dials and looked as if they'd come right out of the 1920s, while the third one was a modern phone with TouchTone buttons to facilitate using services that required them, such as telephone calling cards. There was also a modern ethernet jack, which provided internet access, something I had suggested and Anthony had implemented. The small refrigerator in the suite was also modern, but was hidden inside a period oak cabinet.

I unpacked my bag, used the bathroom, then left the room. I rode the elevator down to the lobby and went to reception and asked for Anthony. I was directed to the restaurant, where I found him speaking with some staff members. He acknowledged me, finished his conversation, then came over to shake my hand.

"Welcome! I love the suit!"

"Thanks!"

"Did you see the flower shop?"

"No. I left my car with the valet and came in the front entrance. I'll wander around and see everything later. I just wanted to say 'hi'."

"If there's anything at all you need, just ask. Aurora should be here in about thirty minutes."

"Thanks! I think the only thing missing from my outfit is the Tommy gun!"

"We considered toy guns, but after speaking with the local patrol sergeant, decided it was a bad idea. Are you carrying?"

"No. I don't ever carry outside of Illinois where I have my licenses and permits. If I had an occasion where I thought I might need a firearm, I'd speak to a local attorney before I made any decision. Also, I flew down, and even in checked bags, they can create problems, and I didn't check a bag."

"Is there anyone left in the Southside Mob?"

"Theo and a couple of other mid-level guys who are union, and were pretty much left alone by the Feds, but all the top guys are either inside or on parole. The black and Hispanic gangs have taken over everything except unions and trucking, and nobody is paying protection to the Italian or Irish mobs at this point."

"Same here," Anthony said. "My grandfather's generation was really the last, and you know Cincinnati wasn't exactly a major player in the scheme of things. Back to the Marble Palace, we have a charity gambling setup in the conference room with craps, roulette, and blackjack. If you want a cash poker game, I can set one up."

"Not this time," I replied. "I take it the usual casino is closed tonight?"

"Yes. Too many eyes, so to speak. The last thing I want is some snot-nosed reporter snooping around. They're worse than the cops!"

"I'm no more a fan of law enforcement than you are! Right now, I have IRS agents and SEC investigators snooping into my books."

"What happened?"

"Most likely fallout from the takeover of one of my competitors. One of the founders of the original company objected to the buyout and the offered price. I

backed him into a corner with a strategic bankruptcy filing and I suspect he tried to tip off the IRS and SEC. We'll be OK, because the most they'll find would be an accounting or record-keeping error, and those would result in small fines and possibly back taxes, depending on the error. We don't play any games with questionable tax avoidance strategies, nor do we do anything that should raise questions with the SEC, but, alas, here we are."

"I get audited about every three years. They don't trust businesses with large turnover and low profit margins like restaurants, especially with cash transactions and tips to employees. The hotel won't be as much of a problem, though there is still the tipping issue."

"The government has to get their cut, and they don't trust anyone. Of course, if the tax code and rules weren't such a mess, it would help, but the government has no impetus to be either efficient or clear, as there is no recourse against the government except perhaps they don't collect quite as much money or can't put in you jail. Heck, in most cases you can't sue to collect damages, even if the government agent has committed a crime!"

"As you say, the Mafia has to deliver, while the government does not!"

"And the government does not like competition, so they have to get rid of the efficient operation!" I replied with a grin.

"I have some things to do. I'll see you at dinner, then in the casino."

"Thanks."

We shook hands, and I returned to the hotel, then went to check the flower shop, which was a wonderful replica of a 1920s flower shop, similar to Schofield's Flowers, Dean O'Banion's shop in Chicago. As I'd suggested, he'd given a concession to a local flower shop. A sign indicated that they could put flowers in

a guest room, so I paid for a vase of mixed flowers, which they promised would be delivered by housekeeping within the hour.

I walked back into the hotel proper, then went to check out the conference room, which was set up as a period gambling establishment, complete with antique gaming tables and roulette wheels. I decided I'd play craps, because the whole image of Aurora blowing on the dice for luck was something that made me chuckle.

I went to the speakeasy, and even though it wasn't officially open for another two hours, the barman happily poured me a glass of Templeton Rye. I sipped it slowly, and had just finished when Aurora D'Angelo walked in, wearing a black 'flapper' dress which showed off her svelte form. She came over to me, followed by a pretty redhead in a similar dress, though the redhead's was green. Both girls also sported elbow-length gloves which matched their dresses.

"Hi, Steve!" Aurora exclaimed. "This is my friend Shannon O'Reilly. I figured no Don worth his salt would be in public without a girl on each arm!"

I laughed, "Of course you did! Hi, Shannon."

"Don Stephen," Shannon said with a bright smile.

"I love your suit," Aurora said. "Put on the fedora, if you would."

I did, despite being inside, then struck a pose.

"You totally look the part, though I don't think many Dons had beards."

"No, they tended to be clean shaven," I replied. "But I wasn't going to shave the beard for this! Shannon, are you a student at UC?"

"Yes. I'm a Freshman in pre-med."

"Can I get you two a drink?"

"White wine," Shannon said. "If they'll serve me."

"They'll serve me," I replied. "Guaranteed. And nobody will ask. Aurora?"

"Bourbon, neat, please."

I ordered drinks for them, which were provided by the barman without question. I tipped him for the drinks, though they were, as mine had been, on the house.

"Where are you from, Shannon?" I asked.

"Portsmouth," she replied. "Do you know where that is?"

"On the Ohio, due south of Columbus," I replied.

"Aurora says you're from Chicago. Do you live in the city or in the suburbs?"

"In the city, on the South Side, near the University of Chicago."

Anthony came over to us and greeted his niece, who introduced her friend.

"We'll open the speakeasy and the restaurant in about an hour," he said. "Feel free to eat whenever you like, and, of course, partake of gambling, dancing, or any other amenities. If you need anything at all, just ask!"

"Thanks," I replied.

[New York City, New York]

 Birgit

When I walked off the American Airlines flight at La Guardia, I was VERY happy because I'd turned fourteen and no longer had to travel as an unaccompanied minor. That made things SO much easier, as I could just do what I needed to do without an airline employee constantly looking over my shoulder and escorting me everywhere. I quickly made my way through the terminal concourse to the arrival hall and immediately saw a good-looking Hispanic guy with a sign that said 'Birgit A'.

"I'm Birgit Adams," I said to him.

"I'm Gabriel," he replied. "You're going to Midtown East?"

"Yes!"

"It's a twenty minute drive. May I take your bag?"

"Absolutely!" I replied, handing him my weekender bag.

He took it, then turned, and I followed him to the 'livery' waiting area where his black Lincoln Town Car was parked. He opened the back door for me, I got in, and he closed the door. He put my bag in the trunk, then got in. He asked me to fasten my seat belt, which I'd already done, and then buckled himself in, started the car, and pulled away.

"First time to New York?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "But I've flown to Boston on my own before, and to Europe with my parents."

"What does your dad do, if it's OK to ask?"

"It's OK to ask any questions," I said. "If I don't want to answer, I'll tell you. My dad owns a computer software and consulting company and my mom is a chemistry professor at the University of Chicago."

Of course, there was my other mom, who was a trauma surgeon, and Suzanne, who was pre-law, but in keeping with our 'minimal information' rule, I kept those to myself.

"How long have you worked for the car service?" I asked.

"Two years. I'm a Senior at NYU in the village. I'm an environmental engineering major. You're in High School?"

"Yes. I go to the Lab School at the University of Chicago."

"Junior or Senior?"

"I wish!" I exclaimed. "Freshman."

"You look older."

"Thanks!"

He was cute enough, but I was here to see Marcella, so I wouldn't have time to see him even if he was interested and OK with me being fourteen.

"What's in New York?"

"A friend," I replied. "Well, one friend I'm staying with and one I'm visiting. Can I ask why a good-looking guy is working on Friday night?"

"Helping pay for school," he said. "A date costs me money, this makes me money. I work every evening except Sunday and Monday, plus Sunday morning and afternoon."

"When do you do your homework?"

"When I'm waiting, or during the day at school. Is your friend a guy or a girl?"

"A girl," I replied. "I met her at my friend's bed-and-breakfast in Vermont over the summer and we're going to hang out over the long weekend."

"Your parents allow you to travel by yourself?"

"Since I was eight," I replied. "Of course, the stupid airlines required me to have an escort until I turned fourteen."

"You aren't worried about coming to New York?"

"Why? I'm going straight from the airport to near the UN, and my other friend lives on the Upper East Side. You met me in the terminal and will drop me off at the door with the doorman. How dangerous could that be? I have my mobile phone in case there are problems and besides, I'm 1st Kyu in Shōtōkan karate and will earn my black belt sometime in the next year."

"You're serious?"

"Yes! My dad is 6th Dan and a Senior Instructor and my mom is 1st Dan."

"No wonder they're OK with you traveling alone!"

I laughed, "The world is not nearly as dangerous as people claim. The media and politicians exaggerate everything and do their best to scare people. They can't scare me because I'm informed, intelligent, and able to defend myself if necessary."

"You're sure you're fourteen?"

"Positive!"

"Where were you when I was in High School?!"

"In first or second grade, I think!" I giggled.

"I meant girls like you!"

"There are no girls like me!"

Gabriel laughed, "You are very interesting, Chica!"

"I know!"

He laughed as we drove onto the bridge spanning the East River, which meant we were almost to Colonel Katy's apartment building. Two minutes later, we pulled up, and a doorman opened the door to the Town Car for me. Gabriel got out, retrieved my bag from the trunk, and handed it to me.

"Thanks!" I said.

He handed me a clipboard to sign the invoice, which I did, adding a 20% tip as Dad had advised I should.

"Thank you!" he declared. "Perhaps I'll see you again!"

"Perhaps!" I agreed.

He got back into his Town Car and I followed the doorman, who let me into the building.

"Mrs. Anisimov is expecting you," he said. "She's on the 8th floor, apartment A."

"Thank you!" I said, handing him \$5.00, again as Dad had advised.

I thought tipping was dumb, but it was the way things worked, and as Dad said, it was a significant portion of the income of service people who were often underpaid. I pressed the button for the elevator and the door opened almost immediately. I pressed '8' and the elevator doors closed and it began moving. It didn't stop until the eighth floor, where I walked out and down the hall to apartment 'A' where Colonel Katy was waiting at the door.

"Hi, Birgit!" she exclaimed.

"«Добрый вечер, товарищ полковник»,» I said with a smirk. ("Good evening, Comrade Colonel.")

"I am going to Chicago and I am going to shoot your father!" Colonel Katy said in a gruff voice.

"He said you would say that when he taught me those words! How are you?"

"I'm good! Come in, please!"

I walked into the apartment.

"Did you call your father?"

"As soon as I landed, I texted him and called my mom."

"Good," she replied. "It's just me and you for dinner. Aleksey has protection duty tonight for a visitor from Moscow. I ordered Chinese food, which should be here momentarily."

"Great!"

"Let me show you the guest room. What are your plans?"

"I'm meeting Marcella for breakfast tomorrow morning at Gotham Café on 2nd Avenue and East 68th. After that, I'm not sure."

We walked down a short hall to the guest room, and I put my bag on the bed. I excused myself to use the bathroom, and when I came out, dinner had been delivered, so we sat down to eat.

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

After an awesome dinner, Aurora, Shannon, and I went to the charity casino, and wrote out a check for a donation to Cincinnati Children's Hospital, and in exchange, received chips which could, if I were to win, be exchanged for prizes, though the prize values were such that the bulk of the money would go to the charity and be tax deductible.

"Would you like chips?" I asked the girls.

They both declined, saying they didn't know how any of the games worked.

"How do you get to be twenty and nineteen without at least learning how to play blackjack?" I asked.

"We played Canasta at home," Shannon replied. "Otherwise, it was card games like *Rook* or *Uno* that didn't use regular decks of cards."

"Nobody played cards in my family," Aurora said. "And I've never been to Vegas or Atlantic City. What are you going to play?"

"Craps, because it's more exciting than blackjack or roulette. I'm a poker player, not a gambler."

"Hang on!" Shannon protested. "If you play for money, isn't that gambling?"

"Technically, yes, but Texas Hold 'Em poker is a game of skill, not a game of chance."

"But isn't the deck shuffled, meaning it's random?"

"It is, but the game is played in such a way that information is available to make the actual value of the cards in your hand or on the table far less relevant than it might seem. I'd have to show you how the game works, and I think we'll have more fun at the craps table with a bunch of people."

"How does that game work?"

"It's a dice game where the object is to roll the same number twice. There are a host of other rules, including rolls which cause you to win or lose instantly, and there is betting on every throw of the dice, as well as betting on if the shooter, that is, the person rolling the dice, will win or lose."

We walked over to a fairly raucous table just as a new shooter was handed the dice. Before I bet, we watched, and I explained each roll, culminating with the player 'crapping out' after three rolls. After two more shooters, where I bet and basically broke even, the dice came to me. As I'd planned in advance, I held them up to Aurora.

"What?" she asked.

"Kids!" I groaned, rolling my eyes. "Blow on the dice for luck!"

"THAT is what you want me to blow on?" she asked, causing the other people at the table to laugh.

"Here?" I chuckled. "Yes! The other thing would likely get us arrested!"

She blew on the dice, I placed my bets and threw the dice, with 6-1 giving me a win on my 'come out' roll. I made four points, and won a decent amount of money before I 'crapped out' and passed the dice.

"Why does nobody bet on you to lose?" Shannon asked. "Statistically, you will."

"It's considered bad form," I said. "You *can* bet Don't Pass, but you'll draw the ire of the rest of the table for basically betting against them and winning."

"But shouldn't you bet based on what you expect to happen, not on how other people feel?"

"Craps is, despite each person making their own bet, a community game because you're betting on the shooter making certain rolls, and unlike roulette, everyone at the table can win together, even if they make different bets."

"Listen to the man!" a gentleman who was probably around my dad's age said. "If you want people to hate you, bet Don't Pass."

"It's an 'a-hole' bet," another man of similar age said.

I was quite often contrarian, and there were, of course, good times to bet Don't Pass, but making enemies was not on my agenda, even if it was only good-natured, as it was all for charity. I left the table about an hour later, with about twenty percent more chips than I'd purchased. After a quick discussion, we went to the roulette table so the girls could play.

 Jesse

"You seem to have gone from an unlimited stable of girls to none," Libby observed as I drove her and Lilibeth home after the gang had watched *Time Bandits* at my house.

"It's just kind of the way things worked out," I replied. "Or is that your way of inviting me for a threesome?"

I knew Lilibeth had zero interest in guys, and I was sure she'd take it as the joke I meant it to be.

"You'll be playing ice hockey against Satan before THAT happens!" Lilibeth declared.

"Darn," I chuckled.

"You're such a goofball," Lilibeth declared. "You wouldn't experiment with Tim or DeShawn, would you?"

"No chance! I totally get where you're coming from."

"Well, I have twice as many options for dates on Friday nights!" Libby declared.

"No thanks!" Lilibeth and I both declared.

"What time is your game tomorrow?" Libby asked.

"8:00am, against De La Salle; This is Pete's second game. Then the rest are mine."

"He plays against the least competitive teams, right?"

"Yes, though it's in the middle of the season so as not to disrupt the team before the playoffs. He has a really good shot at being starter his Senior year after I leave for UW Madison."

"That's a sure thing?" Libby asked.

"That's my plan," I replied. "Could it change? Sure. Will it? Probably not."

We reached Lilibeth's house and Libby walked her to the door, they hugged, and then Libby came back and got into the passenger seat of the BMW.

"Her parents are still in the dark?" I asked.

"It's just easier that way," Libby replied. "They never object to us hanging out and spending time alone together, and she can be at my house after school without them freaking out. If you're interested, I could come over tomorrow after the hockey game. Lilibeth has to do stuff with her parents in the afternoon."

"Ebele is coming over for lunch," I replied.

"So you're not at zero!"

"Even if she wasn't coming over, I'm not at zero! It's just not crazy like last year."

"That's right, you have your math homework meeting once a week!"

"You have to admit that last year was totally crazy, and it almost spiraled out of control after the saunas. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and not much came of it. I was curious about you and Lilibeth, because your ideal is a guy and a girl in a three-way marriage."

"Remember, she's moving back to Boston in less than two years, so it was never going to be anything permanent. And it's not like I'm not enjoying being with her, plus I have you on the side from time to time to fulfill that desire!"

"And she's OK with that?"

"Yes. She knows I'm bi. She's OK with ME having dick; she's totally not interested, just like Mom One. Unlike Mom One, Lilibeth won't do it to get pregnant."

We reached Libby's house, and I walked her to the door where we hugged.

"Can I get on your schedule?" she asked.

"I'm not doing anything on Sunday afternoon," I replied.

"Call me when you get home from church."

"Will do!"

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

"Ready for bed?" Aurora asked after I exchanged my chips for a nice fountain pen.

"I am," I replied.

She gently pulled me aside and put her lips close to my ear.

"Shannon will join us, if you want."

"Red hair, green eyes, athletic build, college freshman. What do YOU think?" I replied quietly.

Aurora laughed, "I was positive that would be the case. She has a clean STI test."

"Was this the plan all along?" I asked.

"Do you mean did I ask her for this reason? No. I just told her about you and our, well, affair, I guess you'd call it, and she teased me about possibly stealing you away from me."

"The word I usually use is 'dalliance' because 'affair' has the connotation of cheating."

"I did explain you weren't cheating. We're both straight so, don't expect any wild stuff between us."

"Not being a complete idiot, I'm not going to complain about having sex with a hot Italian college girl and a hot Irish college girl!"

"Of course, that doesn't mean we aren't going to try to fuck you within an inch of your life!"

"And I will absolutely return the favor!"

"She's not a virgin, but she doesn't have a lot of experience."

I shrugged, "It's more about attitude than experience, at least in my personal experience. It's possible to have mediocre sex with someone who is very experienced and amazing sex with a virgin."

"For guys, maybe; I'd say that's not true for girls, at least in most cases."

"You mean the 'hair trigger response' problem? Or not knowing their way around female anatomy? I ask, because the first is easy to solve, and I had it myself. The second is easy enough to solve by telling the guy what you need him to do and gently guiding or correcting him as he does it!"

"The two virgins I've been with didn't take direction very well," Aurora declared. "And I hear that from my friends, too."

"There's always the strategy one woman I know used," I replied. "I had to prove I could make her cum before she'd let me cum!"

Aurora laughed, "I bet that challenge was met! In spades!"

"It was!"

"Shall we go upstairs?"

"Absolutely!"

She took a few steps over to Shannon, they had a brief conversation, then Shannon flashed me a big smile and licked her lips. I held out my arms with my

elbows crooked, each girl slipped her arms through one, and we headed for the elevators.

XXXIII. New York, New York

October 12, 2002, New York City, New York

 Birgit

I arrived at Gotham Café at 7:15am early on Saturday morning and saw Marcella waiting for me at a table near the front window. I went inside and let the hostess know I was meeting someone and then walked over to the table where Marcella was waiting.

"Hi!" she exclaimed, hopping up.

"Hi!" I replied.

We hugged and then sat down at the table. A waiter came over and took our orders.

"How was your flight?" Marcella asked.

"OK. It was the first time I was allowed to fly without an airline escort, which was totally cool."

"I've never flown alone. How does that work?"

"If you're under fourteen, then you have to wear an ID, and an airline employee has to watch you one hundred percent of the time from when you check in until you're met by someone at your destination. It's so dumb because I could do it by myself. My brother Albert could fly the plane and he has to follow the stupid rules!"

"How old is he?"

"Thirteen. He's been flying for a few years with a Navy Commander. He can't get his license until he's seventeen, but he's practicing a lot, both with the commander and on his flight simulator."

"That's cool! I've only ever flown with my parents. It's totally cool your parents let you travel."

"Where are your parents this weekend?"

"A conference in Florida," Marcella replied. "They'll be back on Monday afternoon."

"And they won't know you're out?"

"No. My friend Teri's parents are cool and think my parents are too strict. So long as I'm in by bedtime, they won't say anything. We'll meet Teri for dinner, if that's OK with you."

"That's fine with me," I replied. "Where do Teri's parents think you are?"

"Hanging out with a friend. They just don't know you're from Chicago."

"They didn't ask who?" I inquired, suddenly having second thoughts about making the trip.

"I just said you were someone I met over the summer. Why are you so concerned?"

"Because of how your parents reacted in Vermont and the fact I could get into serious trouble."

"How?" Marcella asked.

"If your parents complained to the police, for example."

"But they won't find out!"

"Are you *sure* about that?" I asked.

"Seriously, Birgit, they won't find out! Teri's parents won't say anything, and she sure won't."

"Does she know you like girls?"

"No, but there's something I didn't tell you, and that's that her older sister, who is in college, has a girlfriend."

"And her parents are OK with that?"

"I'm not sure 'OK' is the right word, but they accept it."

That made me a bit more comfortable, but I had taken a risk. Despite my second thoughts about coming to New York, I still felt it was worth it to be Marcella's friend.

"What does Teri think?"

"That it's gross, but she loves her sister, so she just doesn't talk about it and kind of ignores it."

Which explained why she didn't talk to Teri about it.

"What would she say if she found out you liked girls?"

"I don't think she'd freak out," Marcella replied. "She does agree my parents are WAY too strict with me."

"They haven't told Teri's parents?"

"No way! They're like totally embarrassed to have a daughter who likes girls."

"What's with the counselor you're seeing?"

Marcella rolled her eyes, "She keeps saying it's a 'phase' and that I need to start dating boys and I'll understand."

I rolled *my* eyes, "Right, because you *decided* to like girls? Ugh! Who is this quack?"

"She has a degree in psychology, but she's a 'life coach', not a psychologist."

Which probably explained how she could counsel Marcella even though the *DSM* had removed being gay as a mental illness. I probably should have asked Aunt Bethany, but she and dad were on the outs, and if he was upset with her, that was enough reason for me to avoid her. Dad almost never got upset enough with people to avoid them, and when he did, it was almost always because they were prudes or control freaks. That confused me a bit about Aunt Bethany, but I was positive Dad had a good reason.

"Just tell your 'coach' you play for the other team and you aren't interested in being traded!"

Marcella laughed, but before she could respond, our food arrived and we began eating.

"How did you make so many lesbian friends?" Marcella asked.

"At first, it was my half-brother's moms, then my dad's friend Katy, and then I just met people at school. Everyone in my family has a totally open mind and we don't judge people. Well, we have limited tolerance for prudes, control freaks, or idiots, but otherwise, we accept everyone for who they are and the only thing we ask is that people do the same in return.

"Sadly, too many people don't, and they tend to make up the majority of voters. And it makes sense, if you think about it, because if you're a prude or control freak, you make sure you vote for other prudes or control freaks, and they usually win because promising to leave people alone and not control their lives is a losing strategy in elections. It's like State's Attorneys back home -- nobody wins by promising to be lenient or not prosecute people for violating stupid laws."

"How did you become so politically active?" Marcell asked.

"I'm not!" I declared. "I just understand how the system works. My dad has taught us civics, which isn't really taught in schools any more. And he's taught us philosophy, economics, theology, and a bunch of other stuff they don't teach in school. Schools don't educate anyone any more; they just teach to the standardized test and ask you to parrot back what the teacher says even if it's total BS. But anyway, what did you want to do today?"

"You've never been to New York before, right?"

"Right."

"Then let's go to Central Park. There's lots of stuff to do there, including a zoo."

"Cool!" I agreed.

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

"What are you doing today?" Aurora asked as she, Shannon, and I got into the shower together late on Saturday morning.

Well, 'late' for me, as we'd slept until 9:00am and I was usually up before dawn.

"I'm having lunch with my dad and dinner with Joyce and her family."

"Bummer!" Shannon pouted.

"You have the room for tonight, though, right?" Aurora asked.

"Yes. It made more sense to stay here because it's so much closer to the airport."

"We could come back!" Shannon offered.

She and Aurora were both 'conventional' but enthusiastic, and that suited me just perfectly, especially given both were 'Steve types', and Shannon, being a redhead with green eyes, was a major plus. The only negative in my book was that both girls shaved, and I preferred a bit of fur in which to nuzzle my nose.

"What time will you finish at Aunt Joyce's?" Aurora asked.

"Probably around 9:00pm," I replied. "We can meet here around 10:00pm."

"What time is your flight tomorrow?"

"3:00pm," I replied. "Which means I'll need to be at Greater Cincinnati airport around 1:00pm."

"How about a late breakfast after a night of fun?" Shannon suggested.

The previous night had been fun, with the girls basically taking turns, and not exchanging so much as a kiss between them. I certainly wanted to be with them again, though I was positive Kara would tease me about being 'boring' in my 'old age'. The thing was, I hadn't changed, as I'd always adapted myself to what the girls wanted, and it had been the girls, starting with Melanie, Joyce, and Elyse who had pushed me to engage in all manner of things I wouldn't have done on my own. I didn't regret any of it, but my preferences with regard to sex hadn't changed from the time I was a teenager.

"That sounds good to me!" I declared as I soaped Shannon's small, firm breasts.

When we finished the shower, we dried off, dressed, and then when down to the restaurant for breakfast.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

On Saturday morning I ate breakfast, packed up my gear, and then my moms and I headed for the ice rink for the game against De La Salle. This was one of Pete's two games, so I'd be helping Coach Nelson from the bench, but I'd be ready to play if Pete were to be hurt.

"Ready to rock?" I asked Pete when he and I met in the parking lot.

"Locked and loaded!" Pete replied.

After we dressed and Coach gave his usual pre-game talk, we hit the ice. As I skated out, I saw two familiar faces by the glass near the 'sin bin' and skated over.

"Hi!" I said to Jerry and Mia.

"Hey!" they both exclaimed. "We had a three-day weekend, so we came to see you play!"

"I'm not starting today," I replied. "This is one of Pete's two games."

"Bummer!" Mia exclaimed. "Are you free for lunch?"

"I have lunch plans," I replied. "You guys should have called."

"We wanted to surprise you!"

"Meet me after the game and we'll figure something out, OK?"

"Yes."

I skated away from them, thankful that Coach hadn't reprimanded me, but I was positive he'd recognized Mia and Jerry and cut me some slack. We finished our warmups, and I skated to the bench, sitting on the end in the usual spot for the backup goalie, and picked up the clipboard to track shifts and ice time.

[New York City, New York]

 Birgit

When we got to Central Park, we decided to check out the zoo, and as we walked towards it, I felt Marcella's hand brush mine. I still wasn't sure what I should do, if anything, with her, but holding her hand didn't seem like a problem. It wasn't

like holding hands was going to attract attention in New York, and even if it did, we were younger teenagers and nobody would think much of it. It wasn't that I cared, it was more about keeping Marcella safe, and that was the most important thing in my mind.

When I took her hand in mine, I saw Marcella smile from the corner of my eye. We continued holding hands during our walk around the zoo, and chatted, mostly about school, but also about friends, school, and karate. It was clear to me that Marcella was very unhappy with her life, and it made me think of the struggles Aunt Jennifer and Katy had discussed with me.

In both their cases, Dad had been there for them when nobody else was, and it seemed as if the only person Marcella had to talk to was me. That made me wonder exactly what it was she needed from me, and how far I should take any physical activity. The other concern I had was to make sure I didn't do anything that would hurt her, but that was going to be difficult to figure out, because I could potentially hurt her no matter what I did.

After the zoo, we walked to Belvedere Castle, then had lunch. After lunch, we decided to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"Tomorrow, I was wondering if we could just hang out at your friend's place?" Marcella suggested as we began the tour of the museum.

"We could," I said. "I'm here to talk to you and hang out with you, so whatever you want to do is fine with me. I just need to be ready to take the car back to the airport around 2:00pm on Monday."

"OK. I'm glad you're my friend, Birgit."

What she really needed was a friend in New York City, but I didn't want to say that now and make her think I was pushing her away.

"I'm glad I met you in Vermont," I replied.

She squeezed my hand, and we began looking at the exhibits.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

We had another fairly easy game, winning 4-1, with the only goal by De La Salle coming on a late powerplay. And that had Coach Nelson incensed, and he made it clear during the post-game debrief.

"Owen," Coach said, his voice on the edge of anger, "if you take another penalty that's for retaliation, I'll drop you two lines!"

Owen was a winger on the second O-line, and he'd been tripped from behind, but the ref hadn't seen it because it had occurred during a rush up the ice, with the ref looking at the puck. Owen had slashed the player who tripped him just as they came into the ref's field of vision and the ref's arm had gone up immediately. Of course, if Owen did it again, that would mean Nicholas would move up from the third O-line and get even more playing time, which would be a good thing.

We all showered, dressed, and then I headed out to meet Jerry and Mia, stopping on the way to let my moms know I'd need a few minutes.

"As I said, I have a lunch date," I said. "If you don't mind me inviting her along, I think she'll be OK with making it a double."

Mia smirked, "Not the first time I've blocked you!"

I laughed, then said, "But don't make assumptions, please."

"You know I'd never say anything to a girl I didn't know. Who is she?"

"Ebele Adeoye," I replied. "She's a Freshman."

"Softball team or Cheer Squad? Mia asked with a smirk.

"Cheer Squad," I replied with a grin. "That's her walking over to us now."

Ebele came up to us and I introduced Jerry and Mia and explained their surprise visit. Ebele wasn't upset and the four of us agreed to have lunch at Ricobene's at noon. That gave me enough time to get home, put away my gear, and relax for a bit before I picked up Ebele for the drive to the restaurant.

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

After the girls left, I retrieved my car and headed to the diner in Newtown where my dad and I often met for lunch when I was in Cincinnati. He was waiting in a booth, so I let the hostess know and went to sit down across from him.

"Hi, Son."

"Hi, Dad."

"How did things go last night?"

"I'd say really well. I'll hear from Anthony next week about the receipts, but from the looks of things, he achieved the goals he set for the grand opening."

"That's good to hear. I assume you made the same kind of investment you did in your other business investments?"

"Yes."

"Are those caught up in the audit?"

"Only tangentially at the moment," I replied. "That said, I have the utmost confidence in the IRS to find some pretext to audit all the LLCs. They won't find anything material, of course, but that won't stop them from demanding their pound of flesh in some way. Ditto the SEC. I'll pay off the IRS if it's some ticky-tack thing, but the SEC can pound sand."

"I assume you've spoken to Samantha's attorneys on that topic?"

"Not me directly, but Liz, Jamie, and Phoebe Miller have, so I'm confident I can tell them to 'shove it' when they present me with some kind of 'agreement in lieu of prosecution'. Fundamentally, I've complied with all securities laws, and I understand how to play hardball with them from Samantha. I'm actually in better shape, as I don't have a license they can threaten."

"What about the preferred shares you issued to Samantha for financing?"

"Those all cleared SEC review when the SEC was doing inquiries into trades made on September 10th and 11th. All because idiots claimed that people were shorting airline stocks after the first plane hit. Well, the problem with *that*, is that the New York markets never opened for trading on the 11th. Short volumes on the 10th were normal, and except for algorithmic trades, not much happened in Paris or London on the afternoon of the 11th, at least with regard to any of Samantha's clients."

"It sounds as if they have nothing on which to hang their hats."

"They don't, but as I said, that won't stop them from trying."

"And your personal taxes?"

"Nothing so far, and you know we're scrupulous about those. Kara files as head of household with two dependents, which is what Elyse does as well. Josie files as head of household with one dependent. Jess and I file as married with two dependents, and given our income is substantially more than Kara's, we take the mortgage deduction. It's all handled by CPAs and tax attorneys at McCarthy / Jenkins, and audit defense is part of the fee we pay them. I'm totally not concerned."

"How are things with the family?"

"I think the best word to use is 'stable'. With seven teenagers or pre-teens, I don't think 'calm' is appropriate!"

"I'd say that's right," my dad said with a smile.

I filled him in on each of the kid's activities, as well as how Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne were doing. When I finished, I asked him about things at home. Not much had changed, though my brother, who was working as a researcher for a biotech firm, had a new girlfriend living with him at my parents' house, and she had a child from a previous relationship.

We finished our lunches and when I left the restaurant, I headed to Joyce's house.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

I left the house just before 11:00am and drove to Ebele's house. In order to keep things kosher with her parents, I parked and went to the door, rather than wait

for her to come out. Her little brother opened the door and called for her, and a minute later we were in the car heading for Ricobene's.

"I half expected your dad to open the door and give me the third degree," I said.

"He's out, and Mom isn't quite as conservative as dad is. It's my grandma who's the real pain, though."

"Why?"

"She doesn't like the fact that I'm dating a white boy. She thinks I should only date Nigerian boys, and then only if they're Yoruba."

"OK, the only thing I know about that is that it's one of the ethnic groups in Nigeria and a language."

"It's one of those things which simply isn't important here. I mean, your moms wouldn't care if you married a girl who was Irish or German or French or whatever, but my grandmother is very traditional."

"There can't be that many Yoruba here in Chicago."

"There are perhaps eight thousand in Illinois, if even that many. Only Texas has more, I think. But even then, it's not more than about twenty thousand. To do what my grandmother wants, I would have to go to Nigeria. Of course, that IS what she wants, because she wants all the traditions followed. She is not happy my dad moved the family to the United States because she views it as uncultured and lacking proper tradition."

"My moms wouldn't care if married *you*, so long as I was happy. It's totally not a thing with them. Some bigoted people object to miscegenation, but they lost that

battle when the Supreme Court ruled that such laws were unconstitutional. Now all they can do is bitch about it."

"It's even more complicated in Africa than just race," Ebele said. "I'm pretty sure that in the past, the US discriminated against white ethnic groups, which I think is akin to the relationship between groups in Africa. In Nigeria, the largest group is Hausa, then Yoruba and, and then Igbo, which make up about seventy percent of the population. In my grandmother's view, Hausa and Igbo might as well be from the moon."

"I'm going to guess there is some pre-historical single group from which all of them arose?"

"Maybe. But don't say that to my grandmother!"

"So like not telling my Japanese friend that they're from the mainland and that the Ainu were indigenous in Japan when the Yamato people arrived from Korea!"

"Is that true?" Ebele asked.

"If you ask anyone who isn't Japanese!" I replied. "But it's more complicated, as all of those things are, like Celts, Picts, Scots, Jutes, Franks, and so on in Europe. And there still are people who think you should only marry within your ethnic group. I have Italian friends who think that, along with Hispanic friends. To me, it's all bullshit, because ultimately, we're all descendants from people who originated in the Great Rift Valley in Africa. And, as I said last weekend, all the parts are in the same place, look the same, feel the same, and taste the same! Well, with minor variations between girls."

Ebele laughed, "And I suspect that's true for boys, too!"

"I don't make a point of looking at guys, but I've seen enough in the shower to know that's true."

"You're the only guy I've seen naked, so I don't have anything to compare you to."

"Well," I chuckled, "when you've seen perfection, what more is there?"

Ebele laughed, "Yeah, right! Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"How do you chose girls to be with?"

"The only girl I consciously chose was a girl I dated for a short time after things went wrong with Francesca. After that, mostly girls come talk to me and things happen or they don't happen based on what the girl wants."

"Strange."

"That word has been used very often about me and my family!"

"Francesca was the girl you grew up with who has the crazy mom, right?"

"Yes."

"So, besides her, if you had to choose, is there a girl you would choose now?"

"That's a difficult question because I'm not looking for a committed relationship at this point."

"But if you had to?"

"Can I give you multiple names?" I asked.

"I suppose, if that's the only way that you'll answer!"

"Akiko, Scarlett, or Larisa," I replied. "But things could change dramatically between now and when I feel I'll be ready to commit to someone, which is probably sometime in college."

"Because you like being the school stud?" Ebele asked with a sly smile."

"Because I like not being tied down," I replied. "I don't have to answer to anyone except myself right now, and if I want to hang out with you or Libby or whomever, nobody has a say in that except me. The same is true if I want to hang out with my guy friends on a Friday night or spend the day playing video games. That's what caused problems between Nicholas and my sister and I do NOT want to have to deal with that shit!"

"That makes sense. If you want to hang out with your friends today, that's cool. I can wait until tomorrow to feel your tongue on me!"

"You're sure that's what you want?" I asked.

"Positive."

[New York City, New York]

 Birgit

"Birgit, this is Teri," Marcella said when a girl who was about our height with short-cropped blonde hair came up to us.

"Hi, Birgit!" Teri said.

"Hi!" I replied.

"We decided on Chinese," Marcella said to Teri.

"Cool!"

We began walking towards the restaurant and Teri asked about Chicago and my family.

"You seriously have six siblings?" Teri asked.

"Yes. My dad has kids with multiple women. I have one sister with the same mom."

"That's so strange! I only know one family who has more than three kids, and that one is a blended family. Do you go to church at all?"

"No," I replied. "I don't believe in any gods. What about you?"

"We're Jewish," Teri said, "but we almost never go to synagogue. My full name is Tirzah Elizabeth."

"I'm Birgit Elizabeth!" I replied.

"Is your name German?"

"No, it's Swedish. Marcella, what's your middle name?"

"Michelle," Marcella replied.

"Birgit, do you have a boyfriend?" Teri asked.

"No," I replied. "I'm allowed to date, and there are a couple of guys I go out with regularly, but no boyfriend. What about you?"

"I'm not allowed to date, even though I'm fifteen. Marcella has the same restriction."

"When can you date?"

"When I turn sixteen, but only for school stuff or in groups. Dad doesn't want me going on one-on-one dates until I'm eighteen."

"Ugh," I groaned. "That's just not right."

"But my parents are cool and let me do lots of stuff," Teri countered. "And I'm not ready to get serious with anyone, anyway. They aren't nearly as strict as Marcella's parents."

"Marcella," I said, "I didn't ask, but where's your sister?"

"Upstate with my grandparents. She'll come home on Monday evening about the same time as my parents fly back."

"Teri, what do your parents do?" I asked.

"My dad is a civil rights attorney and my mom teaches fifth grade. Your dad is a computer guy, right? And your mom is a professor?"

"That's right," I replied.

"I'm amazed your parents let you come to New York alone," Teri said.

"Why wouldn't they?" I asked. "I'm responsible, I'm staying with a family friend, I have my mobile phone, and I'm trained in martial arts."

"Have you ever used your Kung Fu, or whatever it's called?"

"It's Shōtōkan karate," I replied. "And only once when a fat, ugly guy my dad's age hit on me and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. When he put his hand on my shoulder, I kicked him in the nuts."

"Whoa!" both girls gasped.

"What happened?" Marcella asked.

"The paramedics took him away, and they ended up putting him in jail for about twenty years because he'd abused other girls. He just touched my shoulder, but that was enough to get him in trouble with the State of Illinois, and then other girls came forward."

"That's creepy!" Teri declared. "Were you scared?"

"No! I was offended that he thought I'd have sex with him!"

"Def a perv!" Teri declared. "But if he'd been younger and good looking?"

"Maybe," I said, shrugging my shoulders.

"Have you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"WHOA!" Teri gasped. "You're fourteen, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm fifteen and I don't think I could do that!"

"Which is up to you," I replied.

"What's it like?" Teri asked.

"It's fun, and it feels really, really good!" I declared. "But you have to always use birth control and always have an STI test and make sure the person you're with has an STI test."

"Why, if they haven't done anything?" Teri asked.

And it dawned on me, once again, that I hadn't said anything to Marcella about that before I'd flown to New York. She had read Aunt Bethany's book, so she should know, but if she hadn't had a test, there was no way we could do anything together. The answer to that question would actually give me a clue as to what she was thinking. If she hadn't had a test, it meant she didn't want to fool around; if she'd had a test, that meant maybe.

"Because you can get an STI in ways that don't involve sex," I replied. "And you never can be sure about the person you're with unless they actually have a test. I heard someone explain it as you needing not just to trust the person you're with, but everyone they've been with, and everyone those other people have been with, and so on."

"Well, I don't have to worry about that now," Teri said. "Are you on the Pill?"

"Yes. My mom took me to my gynecologist to get it."

"Hang on!" Teri protested. "Your MOM took you?! To get the Pill?!"

"Yes," I replied.

"My mom would lose it if she suspected I was even thinking about it!" Teri exclaimed.

"My mom would freak out as well," Marcella interjected.

"How do you like living in New York City?" I asked, changing the subject.

"It's OK," Marcella replied. "But I really liked being able to see the stars in Vermont. You can't really see them here because of all the lights."

"What about you, Teri?" I asked.

"I like the city because there is literally always something to do and you can find anything you need or want basically twenty-four-hours a day. Is Chicago like that?"

"It's harder to find things at night; Dad says New York never sleeps, but Chicago does. Otherwise, we have pretty much anything you can think of. But I agree with Marcella about seeing stars in Vermont. I like going there every year, but I wouldn't want to live anywhere except Chicago or some other big city."

We arrived at the Chinese restaurant and had to wait a few minutes before we were seated.

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

"Hi, Uncle Steve!" Amelia exclaimed when she opened the door for me.

"How is my favorite Sicilian niece?" I asked with a grin.

"I'm your ONLY Sicilian niece!" Amelia declared, rolling her eyes.

"Are you two getting into it already?" Joyce asked.

"Of course!" I chuckled. "Hi, Joyce."

"Hi, Steve."

We hugged, and I followed Joyce and Amelia into the house, where Joseph and Jake greeted me.

"How was the Marble Palace?" Jake asked after we shook hands.

"Anthony did a great job," I replied. "How was your work function?"

"I would much rather have been at Anthony's place!" Jake said. "But there was no way I could blow off the work function because I'm up for promotion and it would look bad if I didn't show up. We're going next weekend and we'll stay in one of the suites. The kids will be on their own for two nights."

"I'll alert the governor to have the National Guard standing by," I teased.

"We're not Jesse and Birgit!" Amelia protested.

"And if you believe *anything* Stephanie said about them, you're making a big mistake!"

"Can I get you a drink?" Jake asked.

I thought about how long I'd be at Joyce's and it was close to seven hours, which meant a single drink now would be OK. She'd allow me to pass on wine with dinner, with the excuse that I was driving.

"Bourbon, neat," I replied.

"Blanton's OK?"

"More than," I replied.

Jake left and returned with two glasses, one of which he handed to me. I had a nice afternoon visiting with Joyce, Jake, and the kids, and we had a wonderful meal. After we ate, I played *Clue* with Joseph and Amelia, and as planned, left at 9:00pm to return to the Marble Palace.



October 13, 2002, New York City, New York

 Birgit

Marcella and I met for breakfast at Gotham Café, and after we ate, we headed back to Colonel Katy's apartment. She and Aleksey had plans for the day, so that worked out really well, because it meant Marcella and I could have some privacy, even if it was only to talk.

"What kind of music do you like?" I asked. "My friend has mostly classical CDs, so we'd need to put on the radio for something else."

"Put on 101.1FM," Marcella said. "They play 'Classic Rock' which I prefer.

"I like that best, though I like some current stuff."

I went to the stereo, turned it on, adjusted the frequency with the digital tuner, and set the volume at a level high enough to sound good, but low enough so we could talk.

"I wish my parents were cool like yours," Marcella said when I sat down next to her on the couch. "Do your friends here have kids?"

"Just one daughter," I replied. "She's in Moscow and more or less in business with my dad, though it's two separate companies. From what I've heard, she had conflicts with her parents because they were very conservative Russians."

"Russians?"

"Do you see the medal in the frame on the wall there?"

"Yes."

"It's a 'Hero of the Soviet Union' medal awarded to my friend, who won it as a lieutenant in the KGB. She retired as a Colonel."

"NO WAY!"

"It's true! She and her husband both work for Global Security, so she's doing the same basic job, only the pay is a lot better, and she doesn't have to wear a uniform ever!"

"Wow."

"Anyway, Lyudmila and her mom had conflicts similar to the ones I have with my mom."

"You? But you can do whatever you want!"

I laughed, "In my dreams! My dad calls me 'Empress of the Universe' but it's ironic, not serious! I only WISH that I was!"

"What do you and your mom fight about?"

"Usually it's when she feels she has to be a mom and I don't feel I need a mom. I can give you an example, but you need to keep it yourself."

"Promise!"

"Two years ago a German boy at the bed-and-breakfast wanted to kiss me and I wasn't interested. He blocked the stairs from the game room so I couldn't go up and said he'd only move if I kissed him. I punched him in the chest. Mom was worried and flew out to Vermont from Chicago even though I was OK. I was unhappy and fought with her about it until we talked it out a few months ago."

"And?"

"And we agreed to disagree, but I admitted that she did what she felt was right, and that as a mom, she's not going to react the same way as my dad."

"What did he do?"

"Asked me what happened, asked if I was OK, and then asked if I needed him to do anything. I said 'no', so that was the end of it. I'm positive he spoke to Katy, who runs the bed-and-breakfast, but that didn't bother me because he didn't try to interfere in my life. Of course, if I'd been hurt, or felt I needed him, he'd have dropped everything and flown out, including probably chartering a helicopter to get him from Logan Airport to the bed-and-breakfast if that were necessary."

"He seems totally cool."

"He is! And he mostly stays out of my business, though I tell him pretty much everything."

"And he knows about us?"

"Obviously," I replied. "I explained the problem with your little sister in Vermont, and with my dilemma about visiting because of the trouble your parents could cause."

"But you decided to visit."

"Yes, because when I did my risk analysis, I decided that you needing a friend to talk to had to override the risk of your parents finding out and losing their shit."

"Just talk?" Marcella asked.

"I haven't decided one way or the other," I said. "And I don't think you have, either. But it's moot if you didn't have an STI test."

"I did. You talk like an adult, I mean, more than I do and I'm older than you are."

"You mean the words I use? Or?"

"Yes. Nobody my age would say 'moot' or 'risk analysis' or other things you've said."

"Blame my dad, mostly, but remember, my moms are a chemistry professor and a trauma surgeon, my brother Jesse's moms are both engineers, and my other brothers' mom has a Master's in Finance. Oh, and Suzanne, my dad's other wife

is pre-law, and his girlfriends are both going to get Master's degrees. I live in a house full of eggheads!"

"You sound more adult than my parents do!"

"That's how it is at the Compound! My dad is the only person over eighteen who doesn't have an advanced degree or doesn't plan to get one. He's super smart, he just didn't need an advanced degree to start his company."

"What about you?"

"At least a Master's, probably in chemical engineering, but I have a few years to figure it out. I could even finish two years of college before I decide between chemistry and chemical engineering."

"You're sure that's what you want to do?"

"Positive. You?"

"No clue. Well, that's not true. I want to go to school somewhere besides New York. Probably California to put maximum distance between my parents and me, and because California is WAY more tolerant of gays and lesbians."

"Chicago isn't too bad, at least in the city. And where I live near the University of Chicago, nobody cares. Well, they kind of freak out about my dad's situation, but not about Jesse having two moms. So, did you have an STI test?"

"Yes. I read the book you recommended at the library. I couldn't buy a copy with risking my parents finding out. Did you want to do stuff?"

"I'm undecided, though I also wasn't sure how far you wanted to go."

"I'm not sure either. Would it be OK to kiss you?"

"Yes."

XXXIV. You're Still A Kid

October 13, 2002, Greater Cincinnati, Ohio

 Steve

"Do you think you'll be back in Cincinnati anytime soon?" Shannon asked, snuggling close after she woke up late on Sunday morning after a night of energetic sex which had ended around 3:45am.

"I don't have any plans in that regard," I replied. "I don't usually have a reason to be in Cincinnati."

"The last two nights ought to be enough of a reason!" Shannon declared.

"Don't kid yourself, Shan!" Aurora said, laughing softly. "According to Uncle Anthony, Steve's wives are smoking hot! Not to mention that he has permission to play around, even at home."

"I did very much enjoy the last two nights," I confirmed, "but it's also the case that I don't travel here very often, as I said. If I do, I'll make sure Aurora knows."

"Think you can go once more with each of us?" Aurora asked.

"I believe I've had enough sleep so I can do that!"

Aurora went first, sucking me until I was hard, then riding me gently, giving herself numerous orgasms grinding against me. After she finished, and I had a brief rest, Shannon got me hard, then had me fuck her, slowly at first, but then hard and fast. When we finished, the three of us showered together, dressed, and

went down to the restaurant for Sunday brunch, something Anthony had chosen to advertise widely. That meant we had to wait for seats, but given we were being seated in the VIP room, the wait was only about ten minutes.

Anthony and a waiter came over to us as soon as we were seated, and the waiter poured coffee for us and ask what we wanted to drink. Once the girls had asked for OJ, and I had declined, he left to get the drinks.

"Was everything to your satisfaction this weekend?" he asked.

"If he says no, he's a dead man!" Aurora said, causing Anthony to laugh.

"I meant with the hotel, the speakeasy, and the restaurant!"

"I think everything went really well and I'm happy," I replied. "Your brunch idea seems to have worked very well."

"I set the price as low as I could without losing money," Anthony said. "We'll make a profit on Bloody Marys and add-ons. I'll keep the price low for a month or so, then slowly raise it. The goal is regulars, but also to get the word out about the hotel."

"I'd make the price change in one fell swoop," I suggested. "People will notice continual hikes and assume it's going to continue no matter what you might say. Simply call the current price 'introductory' and then, in ninety days or whatever, raise it to where you need it to be. That will be received better."

"I'll discuss that with Connie," Anthony said, "but it does make sense."

Anthony left, the waiter returned with the two glasses of OJ, then the girls and I went to the buffet line to get our food.

[New York City, New York]

 Birgit

"I hate having to hide who I am," Marcella sighed after we had kissed for a bit.

"I wish I had an answer for you," I replied. "What have you said to your parents?"

"Nothing, really. You know they make me see the counselor and I think I really just need to say I like boys, because then it will stop."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said. "I mean, your parents will expect you to go on dates and stuff, right? Otherwise, they wouldn't believe you."

"Probably," Marcella sighed.

"Did you speak to the person my friend Patricia recommended?"

"Yes, and she said that because I'm fifteen, there really isn't anything I can do. And New York's age of consent is seventeen, which limits my options, according to her."

"Illinois has the same law, but they never enforce it against teenagers who are close in age, and there might even be specific exceptions, but I don't know and don't care. I'm sure not going to report anyone!"

"Have you been with someone older than eighteen?" Marcella asked.

"Yes. And a guy I'm seeing regularly is in college."

"You've done it with him?"

"No. He's worried about how old I am."

"How many guys have you been with?"

"Three," I replied. "And two girls."

"So you're bi?"

I smiled, "No, I'm Birgit! I totally prefer boys, but girls can be fun, too. I plan to eventually get married and have kids, all of which I think I told you in Vermont. If we go further, it would just be fun for me, not like I'd be your girlfriend or anything. First, because of what I said about boys, and in some ways, more importantly, I don't want to be tied down. That's for after college, not during High School."

"Do you want to do it with me?" Marcella asked. "And would you teach me how?"

"It's pretty obvious, don't you think? I mean, you rub yourself, right?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what to do, you just use your mouth and tongue, plus your fingers."

"Do you put your tongue inside?"

"Yes, and fingers, too, if you want."

"It's really that simple?"

I nodded, "It's really that simple. Even with boys, though I know you aren't interested."

"What does it feel like to have a boy in there?" Marcella asked.

"Full!" I giggled. "But seriously, it was strange the first time, and it takes more to cum by fucking than it does with a tongue and fingers."

"Whoa! Seriously?"

"Yes. It's WAY easier for me to cum from oral sex than from intercourse. But once you figure out how to get off from fucking, you just need to tell the boy what to do."

"I thought it was just like in sex ed, you know, put it in and move it back and forth; not that I'd EVER do that."

"That's what you do to get pregnant," I replied. "Guys cum pretty easily, but for girls, it takes a bit more effort and some knowledge. But as I said, you know what feels good for you, and if you do that for the girls you're with, you're most of the way there!"

"Would you take off your shirt?" Marcella asked.

I smiled and simply pulled my polo shirt over my head and dropped it on the floor.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

When I walked out of church early on Sunday afternoon, I turned on my phone and saw that I had a voicemail. I listened, then returned the call to Scarlett.

"I just called to say 'hi' and see how you're doing," she said.

"I'm good. Hockey is great, and we're undefeated so far this year. How are you?"

"School is keeping me busy," Scarlett replied. "Do you have your plans for December?"

"Four of the kids can't make the Canada trip, so it looks as if we're not going. We can't play with a short team. And given it's October, all the tournaments have been filled, so it looks as if we're staying home."

"Why can't those kids go?"

"One of them has some kind of problem getting a passport, but I don't know why. One of them will be in Europe visiting relatives. The other two I don't know why, just that coach said it was a total of four."

"That sucks."

"We were going to be cannon fodder anyway," I chuckled. "Fourteen Canadian teams and two US teams."

"So it's OK if I visit sometime between Christmas and New Year's Day?"

"Absolutely. Just let me know which days you'll be here. The 26th is usually pretty crazy here, because that's when most of the grandparents visit. It's OK for you to be here, I just wanted to warn you that it'll be nuts. Also, if you stay through New Year's Day, we have a great party on New Year's Eve you could attend."

"Cool! I'll call the airlines and check on ticket prices. Before I forget, do you celebrate Christmas on the same day?"

"At home? Yes. At church, no. It's in January on our calendar because we follow the Old Calendar at church."

"When did that switch happen?"

"It depends on the country. In the US, it was in September 1752, when they skipped from the 2nd to the 14th."

"That must have been crazy!"

"I wasn't around to see it," I chuckled. "So I don't know!"

"Goofball!" Scarlett declared, but she was laughing.

"Thanks!"

I was already cutting things close because Ebele was joining me for lunch, which meant I had almost no extra time, which was why I'd left the church building before coffee hour and Sunday School.

"I hate to cut this short," I continued, "but I need to drive home, and I can't drive while talking on the phone."

"The law?"

"More importantly, my dad's rules for driving his car!"

"Doesn't your phone have a speaker option?"

"Yes, but I'm only allowed to use that in an emergency, and this isn't an emergency, at least by my dad's definition."

"OK. I'll call you once I make reservations."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, then got in to Dad's BMW and headed for home.

[New York City, New York]

 Birgit

Marcella and I were cuddling, both of us with our shirts and bras on the floor by the couch. I could tell she was super nervous, and I didn't want to do anything that might push her beyond where she was ready to go. She was totally into kissing and touching above the waist, so I'd stuck to that, too.

"It's OK to be nervous," I said. "I was, my first time, and I really, really, really wanted to do it!"

"You mean with a boy?"

"With a girl, too," I replied. "And the girl was before the boy. I mean, I wanted him inside me SO BAD, but I was nervous about it. But then once it happened, I was like crazy excited!"

"Was it the same with the girl?"

"I wasn't as nervous and wasn't as excited," I replied. "I'd been anticipating having sex with a guy for so long."

"The guy you were with?"

"No," I replied. "A different guy, but I don't think I'll ever be able to do it with him because he was pretty clear it couldn't happen."

"Why?"

"He said he had his reasons, but didn't tell me."

"The way you tell it, it seems like girls don't excite you."

"Sex excites me!" I declared. "Just boys way more than girls. I love fucking and I love sucking a guy and swallowing his cum."

"Just gross!" Marcella declared.

"So don't do it! That's the basic rule about sex -- do what feels good and what you like, don't do stuff you don't like or you don't think feels good. That said, you have to be on the same page as your partner, or you're going to be very unhappy in the long term."

"Can we take off our jeans," Marcella asked quietly. "But leave on our panties?"

"Who says I don't go 'commando?'" I giggled.

"Do you?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"No! I was teasing. We can if you want."

Marcella stood up and removed her jeans, revealing pale green cotton panties. I stood up and did the same, revealing my usual everyday pink cotton panties. I held out my arms, and she stepped forward for a kiss, but broke it a few seconds later.

"Touch me?" she whispered.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

Marcella nodded, and we kissed again. I carefully slipped my hand into her panties, running my fingers through soft pubic hair until they were over the hood of her clit. I applied a bit of pressure and moved my finger, causing Marcella to break our kiss and suck in her breath.

"Yeah," she sighed. "Right there."

"Turn around," I suggested.

"Why?"

"Just do it," I replied.

She turned so her back was against my chest, making it easier for me to rub her, and allowing me to move my other hand to her breast and gently tweak her nipple while I kissed her neck.

"Jesus," Marcella gasped. "Please keep doing that!"

I did, and a few minutes later, Marcella shuddered and groaned.

"Wow," she gasped, breathing hard. "That was better than doing it myself!"

"It gets better," I said.

"You mean your tongue?"

"Yes, but only if you're sure."

"If we don't," Marcella sighed, "it might not happen for years."

"Don't do something you might regret," I counseled.

"But what if I regret *not* doing it?"

That was the real dilemma, and I was positive she was right that it might be a long time before she had a chance given she was so far in the closet. It was a close call on what to do, but the more I thought about it, the more I had to leave it up to her.

"It's totally up to you," I said. "We can take off our panties and get into bed, or we can get dressed and just kiss."

Marcella was quiet for a minute, then turned to face me.

"I want to," she said haltingly, but then her voice grew strong, "I want to have sex with you."

I took her hand and led her to my bedroom.

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

When we finished brunch, I walked the girls to Aurora's car, gave them each a hug and a soft kiss, and once they'd driven off, I went back to the hotel to pack my bag. The weekend had been highly successful, and I was confident that Anthony had things well under control. He'd send the first dividend check in January, and his plan was to begin repaying the principal as soon as the five-year lock-up period ended.

I would have preferred a longer term, but much like Jackie and Jeremiah, he wanted to own his place outright, and eventually turn it over to Aurora to run, though I wasn't sure how that would play out with his son and daughter in the picture. That was Anthony's concern, not mine, as it wouldn't happen until long after he'd paid back the principal. Of course, there was a chance he'd decide not to do that and to keep paying dividends, but I'd worry about that if and when it happened.

Once I'd finished packing, I went down to the lobby to turn in the key and keycard. Anthony had comped everything, so there was no bill to settle. I left reception and went to the restaurant to say 'goodbye' to Anthony and Connie, then retrieved my car from the valet. Once I had the car, I headed to the Greater Cincinnati Airport for my flight back to Chicago.

At the airport, I checked in, went through security, and then did the usual dance with the TSA with my laptop and my shoes, then made my way to the gate. I was about fifteen minutes early, at least compared to when boarding was going to start, so I sat down and pulled out the latest edition of *The Economist* to read. I'd read for about two minutes when I heard a female voice call my name.

"Steve Adams?"

I turned to see who it was and smiled when I saw Debbie V. I jumped up and walked over to her and we exchanged a hug.

"It's been a LONG time!" I said.

"It has! Heading home?"

"Yes. I was at the grand opening of a new hotel in Newport. Are you headed to Chicago?"

"No, Atlanta, but I saw you at security, but I didn't want to attract attention from the TSA."

"What's in Atlanta?"

"A nursing conference."

"Still married?"

"No, I'm divorced. My son lives with me; he's thirteen now. I heard from Debbie C about your unique situation!"

"I figured word got back to you. I think about fifteen years ago I was in Milford and stopped by your house, but nobody was home."

"I finished my BS in Nursing in 1989, and I was living in an apartment in Cincinnati. My parents sold the house in 1988."

"I don't remember exactly when, but it's possible it was after they sold the house. How long have you been divorced?"

"Four years. You had a pile of kids, but I don't remember how many."

"Seven in total," I replied. "Two by Kara, one by Jennifer, and two by Elyse, all of whom you met at one point or another. I have two by Jessica, who's my legal wife."

"I was surprised Kara didn't get the paper!"

"Jess, being a trauma surgeon, needed the legal documents; Kara didn't as a chemistry professor. But Kara is the 'Senior Wife' by common agreement."

The overhead speaker announced pre-boarding for my flight, which would include me, but I had a few minutes.

"That's me," I said. "Let's exchange numbers and catch up soon."

I pulled out one of my business cards, which had all my personal details as well as the work ones. Debbie wrote out her work and home numbers, and we exchanged the information. We hugged, said 'goodbye', and I picked up my bag and headed for my flight.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

Ebele arrived for lunch and I was glad my moms were out for the afternoon, not because I cared, but to make Ebele more comfortable. We had lunch, and then went down to the Duck's Nest, where I put on music. I had verified her STI test, so that wasn't necessary, and the only question was how much Ebele wanted to do.

"Nobody will bother us here," I said. "My moms won't be home until around 6:00pm. One question I didn't ask was if you're on the Pill."

"Yes, but I'm not sure I want to go all the way," Ebele said. "Are you OK with that?"

"Yes, of course."

Ebele smiled, "If you lick me, I'll do the same for you."

"And I'll kiss you afterwards!"

"Not before?" Ebele asked, sounding surprised.

I laughed, then said, "Not what I meant. I meant I'd kiss you after oral sex, because I know some guys refuse to do that. Though we did tease about you doing that before your first kiss, if you remember."

"I said it would be strange! Should I just get undressed?"

"Let me get a blanket for the couch," I replied. I'll be easier if you sit on the couch and I kneel between your legs."

I went to the cabinet and got a blanket, which I spread on the couch. I watched Ebele as she removed her clothes, enjoying the view of her athletic body, which I'd first seen in the sauna.

"Do you want me to get undressed?" I asked when she stood naked before me.

"Yes, but remember what I said."

"I remember!"

I quickly removed my clothes.

"Do you want to kiss first?" I asked.

Ebele laughed softly, "Kiss me once between my legs, then give me a regular kiss!"

I helped Ebele sit down, and she spread her legs so I could kneel between them. I bent down, opened my mouth slightly, and planted a wet kiss at the junction of her labia, causing Ebele to suck in her breath hard.

"Do that again!" she gasped.

Not one to deny a lady what she wanted, I lowered my mouth again, but this time pressed the tip of my tongue between her labia and flicked her clit as I kissed her.

"Ungh!" she groaned. "Don't stop!"

It appeared she was going to have her first orgasm from oral sex before she had her first kiss, and I certainly wasn't going to object! I shifted to be slightly more comfortable, then gently pressed my tongue as far into her tunnel as I could. Ebele moaned and when I closed my mouth around her clit and sucked gently, she groaned deeply and began moving her hips slowly up and down.

I continued pleasuring Ebele with my lips, tongue, and mouth, and it didn't take long at all before she shuddered, groaned, and had her first orgasm. Ebele's taste and scent had made me rock hard, but I felt I should give her a second orgasm before asking her to suck me. About five minutes later, she had a second orgasm, and I straightened up and gave each nipple a gentle suck and lick.

"Jesse," Ebele said, breathing hard, "put it in me!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she hissed. "I want to watch you do it!"

I thought about taking her to the main house so we could use a room with mirrors, but decided that was a bad idea. If we did it exactly how we were at the moment, she could watch just by looking down, so I grasped my shaft, and gently ran the head of my dick along her very slick labia. When it was coated with her juices, I looked up.

"OK?" I asked.

She nodded, then said, "Slow and gentle."

Ebele watched intently as I split her labia with my glans and slowly pushed into her tight, slick tunnel. She was so wet that it only took three gentle thrusts to bury myself inside her.

"Wow!" Ebele gasped.

"Should I take it out?" I asked.

"If you do, I'll cut it off!" Ebele exclaimed.

Taking that as a clear invitation, I began slowly fucking Ebele as she watched wide-eyed. After about twenty strokes, I wrapped my arms around Ebele and used every bit of strength and flexibility I had and moved so that I was sitting on the edge of the couch with Ebele impaled on my dick.

"Wrap your legs around my back and move however feels good," I directed.

She wrapped her arms and legs around me, put her head on my shoulder, and began moving back and forth. She very quickly figured out what felt good and to her and she was making me feel good as well.

"It feels amazing," she gasped through ragged breaths.

It certainly did, and about six minutes later, she had an orgasm, and then a few minutes after that, a second one, and the intense spasms of the second one brought me to the point of no return. Ebele's orgasm had just passed when I groaned and blasted jets of cum deep inside her pussy. We were both breathing hard, and neither of us moved for a couple of minutes.

"You OK?" I asked.

"Can we do it again?" she asked.

"Yes."

We stayed motionless until I softened and slipped from inside her. She stood up and looked down.

"Uhm, could you wash so I can do what I promised?" Ebele asked.

"Sure," I replied.

I got up and went to the bathroom and used a washcloth to clean myself, then went back and sat down on the couch.

"I don't know if it'll be good," she said quietly.

"No sane boy complains about a girl who will take him into her mouth and let him cum!" I declared.

She giggled nervously.

"And you read Doctor Bethany's book, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then you know everything you need to know!"

Ebele smiled, knelt down, and gently took hold of my flaccid shaft. She had clearly taken Aunt Bethany's guidance to heart, as she ran her tongue around the head of my dick, and along the shaft until I was hard, then took me in her mouth

and began bobbing, sucking, and swirling her tongue while stroking me with her hand. I'd never had a bad blowjob, but this one was one of the better ones, and it was from a rookie!

I didn't try to hold back at all, and after a few minutes, I warned Ebele that I was close. She stroked and sucked harder, bringing me off, bobbing, sucking, and swirling her tongue as I came in her mouth. After the last spurt, she bobbed once more, then released me.

"Fantastic," I said. "Sit in my lap and you can have your first kiss."

Ebele stood up, sat in my lap, put her arms around my neck and we exchanged a sexy French kiss.

"Can we use your bed?" she asked, breathing heavily, when we broke the kiss.

"Absolutely!"

[New York City, New York]

 Birgit

Marcella and I went to the bedroom, and both took off our panties, then climbed into the queen-size bed. I could tell she was nervous, so rather than suggesting sixty-nine, I chose to demonstrate what I wanted her to do to me by doing it to her! We kissed for a bit, then I sucked each of her boobs in turn, teasing her nipples with my tongue, then kissed my way down her body. Marcella gasped when I ran my tongue over her clit and began pleasuring her.

As I used my lips and tongue to make her feel good, I realized I wasn't nearly as turned on as I had been with Julie and Peter, or even close to how turned on I had been when I was with Lilibeth. I wasn't going to stop what I was doing with Marcella, but I was fairly certain that in the future, I'd only be with a girl as part

of a threesome. It wasn't that it was gross or anything, just not as exciting as being with a guy, and by a wide margin.

"Yes," Marcella hissed a minute later. "Yes! Keep doing that!"

She put her hand on the back of my head, and began moving her hips as I kissed, licked, and sucked, and it didn't take too long before she pushed her hips up, pulled my face against her, squeezed her thighs against my cheeks, and screamed as she came. I mentally patted myself on the back, and continued what I was doing, bringing Marcella off twice more before moving up next to her.

"Wow!" she gasped, trying to catch her breath.

"You're loud when you cum!" I giggled.

"Sorry," Marcella said sheepishly. "It just felt so good!"

"It wasn't a complaint, just an observation! Something to think about if there is anyone who might hear you!"

"So what do I do?"

"The exact same things I did for you," I said. "I did what I know feels good for me, and it pretty obviously felt good for you!"

"It did!"

She kissed me, then slid down and tentatively took my nipple into her mouth, something I very much liked having done. Of course, what she did *after* that, I enjoyed more! It took a bit of coaching for Marcella to figure out what to do, but given it was her first time, that came as no surprise, and it was no surprise when

I came! After Marcella gave me three orgasms, she moved up next to me to cuddle.

"You didn't seem as into it," she said after a few minutes of silence.

"I'm just not as loud!" I giggled. "Mostly I fool around in my room and my brother's room is right next door!"

"You're sure?" Marcella asked.

"Positive. You made me cum, which is what matters."

"I wish you lived in New York so we could talk and hang out."

"We could chat, at least, if you had a computer or mobile phone. Well, I mean one on which your dad didn't install spyware! I know it's still almost three years from now, but you could go to college in Chicago. It's even possible you could live with us and share my room, but I'd have to get permission from my parents, and they'd have to meet you."

"Seriously?" Marcella asked.

"Yes, but you'll have to be able to pay for college or borrow the money."

"I actually have money in my name. I'm not sure exactly how it works, but my dad did some kind of special investment that saves on taxes if it's used for education, and it had to be in my name. So when I turn eighteen, it's mine."

"That's so cool!"

"You'll really let me do that?" Marcella asked.

"Yes," I replied. "So long as you understand I'm not asking you to be my girlfriend and that my parents have to approve."

"I totally understand. You'll still be in High School, right?"

"Yes; I'll be a Senior. I plan to go to the University of Chicago where my mom teaches, but there are plenty of great schools -- IIT, Northwestern, and Loyola, just to name three more. Will your parents lose it if you decide to go to a school in Chicago?"

"Who knows? I'm not sure where they expect me to go to school. We haven't really discussed it. And I'm still not sure what I want to study. I keep changing my mind, as I said when you told me you were thinking about chemical engineering."

"We should probably shower and get something to eat."

"Together?"

"Yes!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

"Hi!" Kara exclaimed when I walked in the front door.

"Hi, Honey!"

We exchanged a hug and a kiss, then Suzanne greeted me.

"We just arrived home with Jess and dinner is in ten minutes," Kara said. "How was Ohio?"

"Great, though I spent more time in Kentucky! The grand opening of the Marble Palace came off without a hitch. And you'll never guess who I ran into today at Greater Cincinnati Airport!"

"In Cincinnati, it could be almost anyone! Who?"

"Debbie V! She was on her way to Atlanta for a nursing conference and saw me go through security. We exchanged numbers."

"How is she?"

"I only have the barest details -- she's an RN with a BS degree, is divorced, and has a teenage son. She knew we'd married, but not many details."

"Divorced, huh?" Kara asked with a smirk.

"I didn't get that vibe at all," I replied.

"And Aurora?"

"Brought a red-haired, green-eyed friend because, as she sees it, no self-respecting gangster would only have *one* moll!"

"Of course! And?"

"Conventional and neither of them had any interest in 'hot, girl-on-girl action'."

"So, perfect for you, then," Suzanne observed.

"What was perfect for Tiger?" Jessica asked, coming down the stairs.

"Aurora brought a friend," Kara interjected. "A red-haired, green-eyed friend!"

"Of course she did!" Jessica exclaimed mirthfully. "We are talking about Tiger after all!"

"Dinner is ready," Yuriko announced.

"OK. I'll do laundry after dinner, then," I said.

"Your body slave isn't here!" Kara teased. "Have you heard from her?"

"Just a few texts saying she was OK. She's as independent as Jesse, Matthew, and Albert at this point."

"She still needs her cuddle time," Kara countered. "None of the boys do."

"They need their 'dad time'," Jessica said. "It's just playing poker or things like that rather than cuddles, which the girls all need to one extent or another."

We all went to the dining room for what would be a rare dinner with just my wives, Yuriko, the girls, and Albert. I hadn't been sure enough about my flight back for a full Sunday Family dinner, so we'd canceled it. Elizabeth had run the Philosophy Club meeting in my absence, and Miyu had run the Saturday afternoon karate class.

"How was your trip, Dad?" Albert asked.

"Successful."

"And you made a significant addition to our inheritance?"

"Albert, don't be mean!" Stephie protested.

"Albert is just being Albert!" Ashley observed.

"Am I wrong?" Albert asked with a sly smile.

"Ignore him, Stephie," Ashley advised. "If you don't, you'll only encourage him!"

I laughed, "You actually think Albert does that to annoy us, rather than amuse himself?"

Ashley made a face, "What-ever!"

We had a nice dinner, and after dinner I did my laundry. Birgit called just after I put the load into the dryer.

"How is New York?" I asked.

"Good. Marcella just went back to her friend's house."

"And everything is OK between you?"

"Yes. She really just needs a friend who she can talk to who won't judge her. It's strange, really, because I figured it would be easier in New York City, but almost all her friends are kids of her parents' friends, and they all have the same backward attitude."

"Most of the older staff at Spurgeon are like that," I said. "Not all, but most. Samantha has had to crack down on harassment of gay and lesbian employees."

"People need to get a grip!" Birgit declared.

"Yes, they do. Did you check in for your flight?"

"Yes. Mom is picking me up at 10:00am at Midway because *somebody* doesn't have a company day off tomorrow!"

"I promise you'll get your cuddles tomorrow evening," I said.

"I'd better!" Birgit exclaimed. "See you tomorrow when you get home from work. Love you!"

"Love you, too! Say hi to «ПОЛКОВНИК» Katya for me!"

"She promised to come to Chicago to shoot you for teaching me to say that!"

I laughed, "That was the reaction I intended!"

We said 'goodbye' and I disconnected the call by closing my mobile phone.

"Everything OK?" Kara asked.

"Yes. Birgit didn't give me any details, and I'd refrain from asking her unless she volunteers."

"As if she'd tell me something she wouldn't tell you!"

"You never know," I replied. "She's learning that the world doesn't bend to her will, and that's changed her outlook, at least somewhat. Shall we relax together in the 'Indian' room?"

[New York City, New York]

 Birgit

"Did you enjoy your stay here?" Colonel Katy asked when we sat down with tea just before bedtime.

"I did! I just wish my friend's parents were so controlling and close-minded."

"Are they religious?"

"Not really, no, They just seem stuck in the 1950s, even though they're my dad's age."

"May I ask?"

"It's probably better if I don't say to respect her privacy."

"Will you come back?"

"Probably eventually, but I don't know when. Are you coming to Chicago for New Year's?"

"Yes! And don't tell your dad, but Lyudmila is making a surprise trip!"

"Is she bringing Aleksey Yurievich?"

"Of course! She, Yuri, and Aleksey will all come. But please, as I said, don't say anything to your dad."

"I won't!"



October 14, 2002, New York City, New York

 Birgit

"Who did you pay to get to pick me up?" I asked Gabriel when I walked out of the apartment building on Monday morning.

He laughed, "We don't have classes today, and I simply asked! No payoffs!"

"I'm that interesting?" I asked, flashing a sexy smile.

"For a *fourteen* year old!" Gabriel replied. "If you were seventeen..."

"Oh, please!" I exclaimed, rolling my eyes. "The government has ZERO business telling me what I can do with *my* body!"

He took my bag and put it in the car, then held the door for me. Once I was in, he closed the door, then got into the driver's seat. We both buckled our seat belts, and he pulled away from the curb, heading for La Guardia.

"You have it wrong," Gabriel said. "The government is NOT telling you what you can do with your body! They're telling guys like me what *we* can do with your body!"

"OK, but that isn't their business, either!"

"They think it is, and they have guns, prosecutors, and prisons. Come back to New York when you're seventeen. It's legal in both states, so no 'Imperial entanglements'!"

I laughed, "Now you sound exactly like my dad! He uses that phrase all the time!"

"Did you just call me old?" Gabriel asked with mock offense.

I rolled my eyes, which I knew he could see in the rear-view mirror.

"I don't think my dad is old! My grandpa is eighty-five and fought in World War II!"

"Your dad must be the youngest!"

"No. Grandpa didn't get married until he was forty-five because he was an Imperial spy!"

"CIA?"

"And before that, OSS, and before that, US Navy. He's nineteen years older than my grandmother."

"Now I understand why you don't think seven years is a big deal, but if I do my math right, your grandma was around twenty-six, right?"

"Yes. But I'm mature!"

"Yes, you are, but you're also still a kid."

"Do I *act* like a kid?" I asked, annoyed.

"No, as I said, you're mature, but you're also very young! You're a Freshman in High School, and as cute as you are, you're still a kid, and your body is still developing."

"I have news for you, college boy, YOUR body is still developing, because boys develop later and longer than girls! So if *that* is your standard, then we're both kids!"

"Who taught you to debate?"

"My dad! He could whip almost anyone in a debate with one argument tied behind his back!"

"Computers you said, right?"

"Yes."

"And what would he say if he heard this conversation?"

"He'd offer you his sympathy!" I giggled. "And he wouldn't object to what you're thinking about right now!"

"OK, Miss Smarty Pants! What am I thinking right now?"

"What it would be like to be wildly fucked by a fourteen-year-old girl!"

XXXV. A Great Shot

October 14, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"You didn't!" Dad said, shaking his head as we cuddled on Monday evening.

"Of course I did!" I giggled.

"Of course," Dad replied. "And what happened then?"

"I should say that he pulled into a parking garage and I proved it!"

"You do have an active mind for fantasies," Dad observed.

"You have NO idea!" I giggled.

"So what really happened?"

"He said I shouldn't put those kinds of ideas in his mind, but I countered that he'd already had them! I was just saying them out loud!"

"How was your trip other than trying to seduce your driver?"

"Good. Marcella really, really needs a friend who is understanding and won't judge her, but her parents have her on the world's shortest leash! Seriously, they have spyware on her computer and check it every day, and she's not allowed to have a mobile phone. I did talk to her about going to college outside New York,

but that's three years away. I suggested she could stay with me, if she wanted, but that I had to check with you first."

"Let's worry about that in a few years," Dad said. "How will you keep in touch?"

"Through her friend Teri, who has a mobile phone."

"And you enjoyed traveling on your own?"

"Duh! I've been capable of doing that for five or six years, but the stupid airlines wouldn't allow it, even if you gave permission!"

"It's not something you have to worry about again. Well, actually, I'm not sure. If you decide to go to Japan, we'll need to check on the rules Japan might have."

"I actually asked Yuriko about it, and she said because I'll be fifteen, all that is necessary is a letter from you saying I can travel, and she'll meet me at the airport. Akiko can meet Jesse, but he'll be seventeen, so he won't even need a letter."

"I'll suggest to Mom One that she give him one, anyway. Have you two decided to go?"

"Not a hundred percent, but we're pretty sure. Jesse can work around his month in Minnesota, and I'll go see Katy then, so we don't have a conflict."

"The sooner you book your tickets, the better price you'll get."

"First Class?" I asked.

"In your dreams, Pumpkin! That would be a \$10,000 round-trip ticket!"

"I'm worth every penny!" I declared. "And then some!"

"When you earn the money for First Class, then you can fly First Class! Even I don't fly First Class overseas!"

"Samantha's plane?"

"Would cost you even more! And when I've used it, it's mostly been for work."

"Speaking of flying, how was Ohio?"

"Good. Anthony's new hotel looks great, the service is great, and our investment should pay off handsomely."

"Have you ever made a bad investment?"

"Not so far, but that doesn't mean it won't happen."

"What investments do you have? I mean, besides stocks?"

"You know one other one, for sure."

"Duh! Katy's bed-and-breakfast."

"Yes. And a motel and a restaurant in Rutherford, Ohio, plus some convenience stores in California. In the past, I helped Jackie and Jeremiah start their business, but they bought me out, as they planned."

"Why?"

"That was their plan from the beginning. I lent them money to get started, but they wanted to own their architecture firm outright, so they paid me back. The

others have chosen to retain their capital and pay dividends. When they eventually sell, I'll get my principal back."

"What about NIKA? Does anyone own part of it besides you and the ones who started it with you?"

"Through the Employee Stock Ownership Plan mostly, but some people were also given shares as a reward for their contribution. They can't sell them except to me, so there's no way for me to lose control of the company. And even so, I hold more than fifty percent of the shares."

"How did that work? I mean, you guys started it together."

"I put up the money to start the company, which meant I was basically paying them out of my own pocket."

"I hear you talk about Samantha having shares."

"They're special shares called 'Participating Preferred Shares' and they're really what are called 'debt instruments'. I borrow money from Samantha and pay her dividends and eventually buy back the shares. It's cheaper than going to a bank. The shares can only be sold back to NIKA, though if we were to sell the company, she could convert them to regular shares and would get to name two directors to the Board."

"I am absolutely going to stick to chemistry!" I declared. "That business talk makes my head hurt!"

Dad laughed, "It's not my favorite thing to think about, and you know your Aunt Stephanie runs NIKA because I don't want to, and neither do Julia, Cindi, Elyse, or Dave!"

"Can I ask you something about Mom?"

"Which one?" I asked.

"The doctor."

"They're *both* doctors!" Dad smirked.

"The *medical* doctor! And you knew that!"

"She's the one who doesn't have a doctorate!" Dad teased.

"What-ever! Why isn't she Chief Attending?"

"You're going to have to ask her that one yourself," Dad said.

"Because of Grandpa Al?"

"Again, you need to ask your mom," Dad said.

"But you know why, right?" I challenged.

"No comment."

When Dad wouldn't answer, it meant there was something private that I didn't know, and that meant I might never be able to find out. That annoyed me, but there wasn't much I could do about it if Mom wouldn't answer.

My sisters came in to say 'good night' and because I had school the next day, I said 'good night' to dad as well. He kissed my forehead, I kissed his cheek, then got up so my sisters could get their hugs and kisses, and then the three of us went upstairs.



October 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Wednesday, after school, I met Bob at Photography Club. I was really enjoying taking pictures, and had even borrowed Dad's digital camera to experiment. But even more, I was enjoying working with Bob. And that was what gave me pause about fucking. I wanted to, but I also didn't want to mess up what was a cool partnership. Dad seemed to manage, but Dad also managed to have lots of teenage girls while I was having trouble getting guys in their twenties!

"How was New York?" Bob asked.

"It was fine. My friend's parents are psychotic."

"These are the ones who flipped out because they saw you two kissing?"

"They didn't see us, but her bratty little sister did, and she ratted us out to their parents."

"Are your little sisters bratty?"

"Not really," I replied. "Stephie was a pain in the butt for about eight months, but she's mellowed a bit. Ashley isn't a brat, but she is scary!"

"Scary?"

"She knows everything and can figure out everything. I thought I was good at it, but she's even better! And she's also quieter!"

"That wouldn't take much!" Bob teased.

"Hey!" I protested.

Mr. Tavares came in just then, so I couldn't say anything more. We spent the hour discussing photo composition, with numerous examples. The thing I found most interesting was using shadows with black-and-white film, because those pictures were the coolest of the entire collection. I had an intriguing idea, but I couldn't discuss it in front of the other club members. Once Mr. Tavares dismissed us, I pulled Bob aside.

"I was thinking that it would be insanely sexy to use shadows instead of clothes."

"If you want to model, I won't object!" he declared.

"We'd have to ask my dad to make sure we stayed out of trouble with the law. It's dumb, but I could wear a string bikini that left almost nothing to the imagination and that would be fine, but show my boobs? End of the world!"

"I'll risk the end of the world to see them!" Bob teased.

I laughed, "Seriously? They aren't that great!"

"They're attached to you, which makes them great!" Bob declared.

"Suck up!" I giggled.

"No, that's what YOU do! I lick up!"

"Somebody is horny!"

"I asked if you wanted to fuck and you said 'yes'! What do you expect?"

"Can you come over on Sunday?" I asked. "I want to talk more."

Bob frowned, puzzled, "Are you changing your mind?"

"Don't freak out, please. I just want to talk about it, OK?"

"Sure. Lunch?"

"Yes. And then we have our Hangout."

"OK. See you then."

I give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek to reassure him, then went to meet Fangsu for our walk to my house to do homework.

 Jesse

"Birgit and I decided to go to Japan in August," I said to Dad after he got home from karate. "We'd leave on the 2nd and come back on the 15th, which would give us about ten days there, given flying time. That doesn't interfere with hockey, which is June 15th to the 28th, then July 6th to July 19th. I already checked with Doctor Mary and I can stay with them the week between the two sessions."

"And I checked with Katy," Birgit said. "I'll visit her from June 15th to June 29th."

"I assume you checked with Yuriko and Akiko?" Dad said.

"Obviously!" Jesse replied. "They'll both travel to Tokyo to meet us on August 3rd."

"Did you speak with Liesel?" Dad asked.

"Yes. She's putting together an itinerary for us. And despite Birgit's pipe dream, I asked her to book Coach."

"Hey!" Birgit protested. "I just asked what it would cost!"

"And Dad was right!" I replied.

"What-ever!" Birgit exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

"Did you ask her about Business Class upgrades?" Dad inquired.

"Yes, but your company doesn't fly overseas, so the airlines won't accommodate."

Dad nodded, "I thought that was the case. Domestic segment credits can't be used for those upgrades the way they could for Birgit's flight to and from Boston."

"Once Liesel has the itinerary, she'll email it to you, along with the ticket prices. She said given the cost, she needs you to sign off."

"Right. I've given her written permission for your domestic flights, so long as they're booked two weeks in advance."

"I'm going to go to bed," I said. "Just let me know if there are any concerns."

"I doubt it," Dad said. "Good night."

"Good night."

"Oh, one more thing," Dad said. "I assume you cleared this with your moms?"

"Mom One and Mom Two both said it was OK."

"My mom said, OK," Birgit said. "I didn't talk to my other mom."

"That's fine," Dad replied. "They'll talk to each other and me about it if there is a concern, but I highly doubt it."

I said 'good night' again, then headed back to the coach house to go to bed because I had to be up so early for hockey.



October 18, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Friday, Philip came to the house just after 5:30pm so that we could walk to Giordano's to have dinner with the gang then see *The Ring*, a remake of a Japanese movie, *Ringu*, starring Naomi Watts, a new actress.

"How was New York?" he asked when we left the house.

"Good. My friend just needs new parents."

"I'm pretty sure you think everyone but you needs new parents!"

I laughed, "Not quite. Some of my friends' parents are OK, but there are WAY too many uptight people in the world."

"Including me?" Philip asked.

"That depends!" I declared.

"On?"

"If you give me a proper kiss later!"

"I could get in so much trouble," Philip protested.

"But you want to, right?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters! First, there is no way I'm going to say anything. Second, you know how I behave in public, so nobody would have a clue. Third, you could ask my dad for permission and he'd give it. Fourth, it's the next logical step!"

And the logical step beyond that was even better, but if I suggested it, I'd probably scare him away. I was still seeing Peter on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I wasn't going completely stir crazy. Julie hadn't been available this week, but I was positive that sometime in the next few weeks, she'd go all the way with Peter. And at that point, he'd be wildly fucked by *two* horny teenage girls once or twice a week!

All of that was to say that I wouldn't drive myself nuts by being patient with Philip, not to mention that I might be with Bob on Sunday, though I still wasn't sure. What I was sure about was that I wanted Philip, and the only way that was going to happen was to take it slowly and have him get comfortable with the idea.

"Let me think about it," Philip replied.

I kind of felt that was the best I could hope for at this point.

"OK," I agreed.

 Jesse

"Who do you play tomorrow?" Libby asked when she and Lilibeth sat down at the table in two chairs to my right.

"Chicago Latin," I replied. "They're good, because like all Roman Catholic schools, they can recruit in ways a Chicago Public School team can't. But we should beat them."

"We'll be there!" Libby declared.

"I've never been to a hockey game," Fangsu, Birgit's new friend, who was sitting on my left, said.

"The games are open to the public and admission is \$1 for students," I said. "The game tomorrow is at Johnny's Ice House in Chicago at 10:00am."

"We can give you a ride," Libby offered.

"Birgit, do you go?" Fangsu asked.

"Only sometimes, because of karate. Dad is skipping karate for Jesse's game, but he has his afternoon class. I'll go to the playoff games, of course."

"Everyone, this is my friend Abigail," Pete said, sitting down at the table.

Everyone said 'hi' to Abigail, a cute blonde. She was way shorter than Pete, and if she weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet, I'd be shocked. He was about my height and weight, and she was at least seven inches shorter. Except for Akiko, I went for girls who were closer to my height, but we'd managed, so I was sure Pete and Abigail would manage, if that's what 'friend' meant.

"Are we going to the movies tonight?" Pete asked.

"After Fangsu and I looked at the paper on Wednesday, we suggested *The Ring* to Jesse," Birgit said. "It's a remake of a Japanese movie about a cursed videotape. It's PG-13, so no problems there."

"A cursed videotape?" Leslie asked.

"Yes, anyone who sees it dies within a week."

"Weird!"

"I'm good with that," Pete said. "Abi?"

"Sure," she agreed.

Everyone else was in agreement, which was a good thing. Our pizzas arrived about five minutes later and everyone dug in.

 Matthew

"Next weekend we should hang out with Jesse and Birgit's group," I suggested as Chelsea and I headed to Maxim's for dinner.

"That's OK sometimes," Chelsea said, "but we only get to see each other on weekends, so I want time with just us, too, and we're going to Jesse's hockey game tomorrow."

"That's why I didn't argue with you about tonight!" I replied. "I want to spend time with you, too, but I also want to hang out with my siblings. Also, please don't forget we have Arby's Halloween Party on the 26th and my dad's on November 1st."

"I haven't forgotten! Are we going to go in costume to your dad's party or just wear masks?"

"Masks, I think, unless you really want to dress up, and if you come up with an idea."

"Masks are fine. Are they the half ones?"

"Yes. Just your eyes, nose, and upper cheeks. It conceals your identity, sort of, because we mostly know what our friends' bodies look like."

"True! How is the Christmas program developing?"

"So far, so good," I replied. "We've changed the order of some things to make it flow better because what seemed OK on paper didn't work too well on stage. We did get one complaint from a parent, but the Principal told them to basically get lost."

"Complaint about what?"

"Being too secular, of all things! We expected complaints from the 'any public display of religion is establishment' crowd who do not understand what 'establishment of religion' means."

"We were taught it meant no religion in schools."

"That is NOT what it means. It means no state church, and no taxes to support an approved church. It's perfectly OK to have a Christmas program, even if it's purely religious. And yes, I know the Supreme Court has said otherwise, but they're wrong as they are on so many other things!"

"Like?"

"It's a long list!" I declared. "And you probably don't want to have that conversation when we're supposed to be enjoying the evening and each other's company!"

"What are we doing tomorrow morning?"

"I figured we could go to Jesse's hockey game. It's at 10:00am, so it'll be over in plenty of time to meet Mark and Maggie at Ricobene's."

"Do you think we could go to Cincinnati over Thanksgiving?"

"We could, but we need to be at my dad's house on Thanksgiving day."

"My mom said they'll do a second Thanksgiving on Friday or Saturday if we drive down. And we can hang out with Pavel and Larisa."

"That's fine with me. Let me just text Mom to let her know."

"Cool!"

 Birgit

"It's really inconvenient to take the train to Kenwood, then walk to the L to get back to IIT when I can just get on the train a few blocks from here," Philip said when we left the theater.

I wanted so much to roll my eyes and say something about that, but I had resolved to be patient.

"What are you doing tomorrow afternoon?" I asked.

"What time?"

"After 2:30pm, which is when I'm home from karate and I've had my shower."

"I didn't have any plans, why?"

"Come to the house, please. You can have dinner with us and we can hang out."

"You don't have to check?"

"No. I'll just let Yuriko know, because she's making dinner tomorrow."

"She seems almost like a servant."

"She volunteered to do it, and she enjoys it. I plan to visit her in Japan next year."

"With your family?"

"No. Jesse is going to visit Akiko and I'm going to visit Yuriko. We'll travel together."

"You can do that? Without your parents?"

"Sure. I have my own passport and once I turned fourteen, the airlines let me fly without having to do the whole 'unaccompanied minor' thing."

"I'm amazed at how much freedom your parents give you."

"Because I'm mature and responsible!" I said.

"Mostly," Jesse said, coming up to us.

"We have time for ice cream," he said. "Interested?"

"Duh!" I giggled. "Of course! Philip?"

"Yes!"



October 19, 2002, Chicago, Illinois



Jesse

"Your cheering section is getting bigger!" Mitch said when we took the ice on Saturday morning for our game against Chicago Latin.

Matthew and Chelsea were there, along with Fangsu, Yuriko, Natalie, Libby, Lilibeth, Rachel, Javon, and about half the softball team and half the cheer squad. I also saw Brooke, Rya, and Kenzie, along with some other kids from school I recognized but didn't know very well. I also saw Abigail, Pete's friend, who was sitting with some of the softball team.

"We can use all the support we can get against Latin," DeShawn said.

"Word!" Tomás agreed. "They're undefeated, just as we are. Battle for the league championship right here!"

"And we're going to kick their butts!" Nicholas declared.

At practice on Thursday, Coach had surprised us by moving Nicholas up to the second line and Owen to the third. It was, I surmised, a mix of discipline and performance, because Nicholas was playing as well as any of the first line wingers. I was positive he'd be on the first line for his Sophomore year, and given everyone liked him, I suspected he'd be named captain once I left for college, which was now only about twenty months away.

We went through our usual warmup routine, then skated to the bench for last-minute instructions from Coach, then took our positions. Our first lines, Jack, Tom, and Kyle on offense, and Mike and Freddy on defense, lined up for the face-off. The ref checked with the Latin goalie, then with me, and seeing we were ready, dropped the puck to start the game. Latin won the puck and set up for their first attack.

They didn't get very far, as the moment they skated in, Tom poke checked the puck back across the blue line, meaning they had to clear the zone. It went back and forth that way, with neither team able to get deep into the offensive zone, except by dump and chase, and in each case, the D-men cleared the puck to center.

I was somewhat surprised that the game was shaping up as a defensive struggle, given Latin, like us, scored a lot of goals, but knowing that, both coaches were executing relatively conservative game plans for the first period, which ended 0-0, with only five total shots, three by us, two by them, and no penalties. Once the horn sounded, we all skated to the bench and then went to the locker room.

 Steve

"Not what I expected," I said to Jennifer after the first period ended.

"Me, either," Jennifer agreed. "I didn't necessarily expect a high-scoring game, but I expected a lot of shots."

"While we have time, what's your take on Jesse's trip to Japan?"

Jennifer laughed, "As if I'd be alive if I stood between Jesse and his Japanese paramour?!"

"The Duck's feathers would be ruffled, for sure."

"I think it's fine," Jennifer said. "I mean, I can't think of a safer place for him to go than Japan, and Akiko is going to meet him at Narita. What did Kara have to say about Birgit?"

"Nothing," I replied. "Jess expressed her usual concern, but it's really attenuated in the past few years. She didn't even blink when Albert told her he'd taken off and landed on his last trip to Cincinnati. She did say she wanted him to be very careful, but she didn't make her usual comments."

"It's so strange that she's the worrywart in the bunch."

"Surgeons are naturally conservative and risk-averse," I said. "Of course, her definition of risk and ours diverges greatly, because to me, surgical procedures are risky, but to her they're routine. And I think that's the actual source of her attitude. They do the same procedure the same way every time, deviating only if there is a medically sound reason to do so, and that doesn't happen too often. She once joked she could do appendectomies in her sleep, and I actually believe she could."

"I believe it! Back to Jesse, I did ask him to put me in touch with Akiko's mom to confirm, and I'll try to call later today. I don't doubt the kids are telling the truth, but I want to make sure."

"Absolutely. I plan to get in touch with Sensei Jim, just so he's aware, but Yuriko lives with her grandfather when she's home, and she's old enough to invite Birgit to visit. She did say her grandfather is aware and approves."

"But Birgit can't practice at the dojo, can she?"

"It's against tradition for her to *train* there, but Sakurako says that Hideki-san will permit Birgit to demonstrate her skills at the dojo."

"And how did the Empress of the Universe take THAT?"

I laughed, "She thinks the rules are dumb, but she also agrees that it's up to Hideki-san to decide, and to the Japanese people to decide how they run their country. Of course, as both Sakurako and Yuriko have said, women run the country, just subtly. I saw that with Emiko and Hiro-san. He would never do anything of which she didn't approve, and everything at the compound ran her way."

"Which worked to your advantage!"

"No comment," I grinned.

"Did Jesse tell you that Scarlett is visiting between Christmas and New Year's?"

"No, but I'm not surprised. They seem to get along really well. That said, it's going to upset CeCe."

"He knows, but he made the decision. He hasn't said anything specific, but they aren't chatting as much as they did even a month ago. I had the impression CeCe wasn't happy about Scarlett visiting and that made things a bit frosty between her and Jesse."

"She had designs on being Mrs. Duck," I said. "And Jesse is not at all interested in thinking about that in any concrete way at this point. And besides, you know who I think the frontrunner is!"

"Yes, I think the Japanese girl is making a move on the outside on the backstretch!"

I laughed, "Cute."

The horn sounded briefly, calling the teams back to the ice, and four minutes later, the referee dropped the puck to being the second period.

 Jesse

The second period was nothing like the first, as the Latin coach had the same idea as Coach Nelson, and the game really opened up. There were ten shots in the first five minutes, double the number as the first period, but both the Latin goalie and I turned them all away. About a minute later, we gained a man advantage when a Latin player, inadvertently in my mind, tripped Nicholas. He'd tried to poke check, and timed it wrong, but inadvertently didn't matter, and the referee's arm had gone up.

Coach went with his usual aggressive strategy, and put out the first O-line plus Nicholas, with Freddy as our lone defenseman. That was a good strategy, especially given Latin's penalty kill was three defensemen and a center. Our strategy paid dividends right away, when Jack won the face-off back to Nicholas,

who wristed the puck on goal. The Latin goalie gave up a rebound and Owen slapped it past the sprawling keeper.

With a 1-0 lead, there was no way we could play conservatively, we had to continue to attack, and that is exactly what coach chose to do. We kept the pressure on, which prevented Latin from mounting a solid attack, as they had to keep their defensemen at the blue line when they did manage to enter our zone. We had complete control of the game, and both George and Nicholas scored, giving us a 3-0 lead at the end of the second period. I doubted Latin was going to take that lying down, so I knew I had to be at the top of my game for the third period.

 Steve

"Looks like they have this one in hand!" Libby declared.

"Bite your tongue!" Josie reprimanded. "No lead is safe!"

"They're up 3-0, Mom Two!" Libby exclaimed. "There is no freaking way Jesse gives up three goals! Not gonna happen!"

"And yet, now that you've said it..." Josie sighed, shaking her head.

"You know it doesn't work that way," I chuckled.

"Says the man who doesn't say things in order to avoid jinxing them!"

"No comment," I chuckled. "But a two-goal lead is the most dangerous lead in hockey! And you know there is no way Coach Nelson is going to take his foot off the gas against the only other undefeated team in the league!"

"Undefeated until today!" Libby declared.

Josie groaned and shook her head, but Jennifer laughed. I was confident in the kids, and was positive Jesse would successfully defend his net, and I hoped for a shutout. If cheering sections mattered, we had Chicago Latin outnumbered by a factor of two, given all of Jesse's classmates and friends who showed up, including Matthew and Chelsea, who were hanging out with Rachel and Javon.

When the third period started, Chicago Latin mounted a ferocious, almost frantic attack, but Jesse and his defensemen stood strong, blocking shots and clearing pucks. Coach Nelson had the defensemen back just a bit further than he'd had in the second period, and they weren't crashing the net as often, but they were still playing aggressively.

Latin had their best chance to score when we took a penalty for a crosscheck about three minutes before the end of the period. I knew that was going to set off Coach Nelson, because it was Owen, who I'd noticed had been demoted one line. Owen skated to the bench, and Coach put out our usual PK of three defensemen and one forward. As soon as the puck dropped, Latin got control and pulled their goalie for a desperate six-on-four attack.

 Jesse

Owen was going to be in deep shit, but I had to push that out of my mind as I saw the Latin keeper charge for the bench. Fortunately, we were up 3-0, so the risk was small, but I was determined to have a 'clean sheet' as they called it football. Latin came rushing up the ice and the sixth man joined the attack. I turned away five shots in just under a minute before Freddy banked the puck off the boards and cleared it, allowing us to change our PK.

Latin skated the puck in and after a flurry of shots, the puck ended up just outside the crease, with an open lane to clear the puck to center ice. That was the smart play, but with a 3-0 lead and less than ninety seconds to go, and with all

their players in our zone, I took a risk and fired the puck straight down the ice towards the Latin goal. A Latin defenseman lunged for the puck but couldn't get his stick on it and it continued down the ice, striking the inside of the left post and going into the net.

Our bench and the crowd went wild, and I was mobbed by our PK team, though I stole a look at Coach and could tell I was going to get a talking-to because the correct play would have been to slap the puck to the boards, or angle it with a light shot to the boards at the blue line. That aside, having a goal on my stats as a goalie was a cool and rare thing, and I knew the team would love it no matter what Coach said.

 Steve

"Oh my god!" Josie gasped as the puck ricocheted off the post and into the net.
"JESSE SCORED!"

"TOLD YOU, MOM TWO!" Libby screamed over the absolute din created by the crowd of more than a hundred and fifty supporters.

"If you thought our Duck was insufferable before," I said to Jennifer, "just wait!"

I saw the look on Coach Nelson's face and I was positive he'd say something to Jesse about the risky play, but in the end, it wasn't *really* risky, given a 3-0 lead and less than ninety seconds to play in the game. Fundamentally, the worst thing that could happen was a face-off in our zone, but the puck was in our zone at the time, and there was no guarantee that slapping the pick to the boards or the corner would have resulted in a clearing attempt.

Nobody sat down for the remainder of the game as our kids killed off the penalty and held off Latin's six-on-five attack for just over a minute, with the crowd roaring approval. The win would leave us in sole possession of first place, and I

was positive the kids wouldn't have a meltdown such as the one they'd had the previous season.

When the final horn sounded, Jesse's team mobbed him, lined up for the traditional handshakes, then skated off the ice and headed to the locker room.

 Jesse

"What was that, Mr. Block?" Coach asked as I was about to leave the locker room with Nicholas.

There was no point in trying to finesse it, so I simply answered with what I'd been thinking.

"I had a clear shot, we had a 3-0 lead, and there were less than two minutes to play, so I took it."

"You know the safe play, Mr. Block."

I nodded, "I do, but Coach, I had a chance to score and it didn't really risk anything!"

"And you know my position on it, and on being a disciplined player. I do not want to see you do it again, or you'll be riding the pine."

"Yes, Coach."

"Great shot, by the way," he chuckled.

"Thanks," I replied, knowing that he was serious both about benching me and about the shot.

"So, is he pissed or not?" Nicholas asked as soon as we were out of earshot.

"He's serious about benching me, but he also thinks what I did was great. If you think about it, he can't really allow undisciplined play, because he'll lose control of the team and the games, and we'll be screwed."

"Coolest play I've ever seen!" Nicholas declared.

"There have been some goals by keepers in the NHL," I replied.

"Is that why you didn't get a game puck and I did?"

"You deserved it with a goal and an assist, and Freddy for blocking six shots with his body. He's going to be sore as hell tomorrow morning."

"Excuse me," a voice from behind us said.

I turned and saw the ref.

"Hi," I said.

"I think you might want this," he said, handing me a puck. "I pocketed it so I could give it to you."

"Awesome!" I exclaimed. "Thanks!"

"You're welcome! First one I've seen in my entire refereeing career!"

He was in his late twenties, so that probably meant fifteen years or so.

"It was totally cool," Nicholas declared.

We continued towards the lobby where it was wall-to-wall people because our entire cheering section was waiting for us. I was mobbed and received hugs and handshakes, and after receiving all the congratulations, Nicholas and I headed to the car, accompanied by Ebele, who was having lunch with me and then spending the afternoon.

"Jesse," Dad called out.

"Yes," I said, stopping.

"I didn't want to interfere with all your friends, but that was a great shot!"

"Thanks!"

"What did Coach say?"

"That if I did it again, he'd bench me."

"And then said it was a great shot!" Nicholas added.

Dad laughed, "It was that, and I'm glad you aren't in any real trouble."

"Coach would have had a rebellion on his hands!" Nicholas declared. "And guess what? The ref saved the puck and gave it to Jesse on our way out!"

"Now that's cool!" Dad declared. "See you later at home!"

"Ebele is coming over so we'll probably end up using the sauna."

"OK. I have my karate class so I'll be gone for a few hours."

 Birgit

Dad's afternoon karate class had seemed to drag on, but it had only been the usual hour, and we'd done a lot of sparring rather than talk philosophy. That was because Sensei Will emphasized sparring and competition, something Sensei Jim had not. He was encouraging Dad to compete, but Dad had so far declined. When class ended, I didn't wait for Dad, Suzanne, and Avanti, but hurried home so I could shower and be dressed when Philip arrived.

I quickly showered, dried off, then sprayed lavender body spray on my torso. I quickly dressed in plain black cotton panties and plain black bra, then pulled on white shorts and a tight black t-shirt. I had seriously considered a pair of ultra-tight short-shorts, but decided I didn't want to scare Philip away.

Once I was dressed, I went downstairs to wait, and realized that the only place Philip and I could have some privacy was my room, because Jesse and Ebele walked past to use the sauna, Dad and Avanti were in his study, Mom and Suzanne were in the Indian Room, and Yuriko, Natalie, and my sisters were in the sunroom. I hoped Philip wasn't uncomfortable, but there wasn't really any choice.

He arrived on time, and after getting us each a Sprite from the fridge, we went up to my room. I shut the door most of the way, hoping that would make him more comfortable. I put on some music then sat on the love seat. Philip came and sat next to me, but didn't try to kiss me.

"Will you give me a proper kiss?" I asked. "Just one, I promise."

"I'm not sure," he said.

"Just one kiss," I repeated.

I put down my bottle of Sprite, then carefully sat in Philip's lap and put my arms around his neck.

"Just one," I said.

He didn't respond, so I moved my face towards his and planted a soft kiss on his lips. The way he reacted made something extremely clear, though I wasn't quite sure how I knew. Philip had NEVER even kissed a girl!

XXXVI. Negative Encounters

October 19, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

I'd promised I only wanted one kiss, so I moved off Philip's lap right away, because I could tell he was uncomfortable. I was pretty sure after that single kiss that the *real* reason he was uncomfortable was that he had zero experience. Unlike Dad, Philip had never discovered that girls were *way* more fun than *Dungeons & Dragons* and other 'boy' things like video games or sword fighting. And that changed the picture completely in my mind.

The question was, of course, what to do next. I had plenty of experience, having been with Kjell, Mikael, Peter, Lilibeth, Julie, and Marcella. I almost laughed because even though I really, really like boys and fucking, I'd been with as many girls as I'd been with guys! I'd also had a few threesomes, though I hadn't yet managed a threesome with two boys, but I was positive I could manage that!

I turned my mind back to what to do about Philip and wasn't sure. Most boys and men were totally interested in sex, even if they might be concerned about the fact I was only fourteen. Peter and Kjell had both been inexperienced, and had been a bit nervous, but this was different. Of course, I'd been nervous the first time with Kjell, but that had lasted all of about two seconds because once he was inside me, all I cared about was fucking! I was pretty sure if I could get Philip to that point, he'd be fine. The question was, how to get to that point.

The 'double whammy', as Aunt Katy would call it, was that he was inexperienced, and I was way younger than he was. That wasn't an issue for me, but it sure was for him, and I had no clue as to what to do next, other than wait

and see what he did or said. And he wasn't saying or doing anything! If things were slightly different, I'd be tempted to simply stand up and take off my clothes, but that would probably freak him out to the point I'd never see him again.

After three minutes of quiet, I felt I had to say *something*, and the only thing I could think of was to ask him if he wanted another kiss. I wasn't sure that was the best idea, but it was the only one I had.

"Would you like another kiss?" I asked.

"Uhm..." Philip hesitated.

"I'd like one," I said invitingly.

Philip didn't respond, and I weighed my options, then moved back to his lap and put my arms around his neck. I looked into his eyes and then planted a soft kiss on his lips. Not wanting to push things too far, too fast, I leaned forward and rested my head on his shoulder and was happy when he put his arms loosely around me. I decided the best strategy was to bank my gains and allow him to decide to take the next step.

We sat that way for about ten minutes, and I decided the best thing to do was to go downstairs and play pool or something like that.

"I liked that," I said.

"Me, too," Philip replied. "But..."

"Let's just take it slowly," I said. "How about we go downstairs and play pool?"

"Sounds good," Philip replied, sounding relieved.

His relief confirmed my feeling that he had no experience at all. I wondered how I'd broach the topic of an STI test, if we got that far, but that was a challenge for a different day. We got up and left my room and headed for the basement.

 Jesse

"What did you want to do?" I asked Ebele when we finished our sauna.

She laughed softly, "I thought that would be totally obvious!"

"I never make assumptions," I replied. "That keeps me out of all kinds of trouble!"

"I bet!"

"So?" I asked as we put on our robes.

"Let's go to your room and see how much trouble we can get into!"

I grinned, adjusted the sauna controls, then took her hand and led her out of the sauna. We took quick showers to rinse off, dressed, headed to the coach house, and went up to my room. We quickly undressed and got into bed, and got into trouble in a very enjoyable fashion. After three rounds, one of which was sixty-nine, we cuddled.

"Do you think this is going anywhere?" Ebele asked.

"You mean like being a couple?"

"Yes. I like you a lot, Jesse, and I *really* like how good you make me feel!"

"I'm not looking for anything exclusive now," I said. "And just so there are no surprises, a friend is visiting from Minnesota over Christmas break."

"But we could hang out and go out sometimes and see what happens?"

"Sure. That's kind of what High School is about. I mean, I'm sixteen and you turn fifteen in about two weeks, so we're WAY too young to even think about anything more than dating, and I don't mean as a couple the way some kids do."

"That's OK, but would you promise me something?"

"That depends on what it is," I replied.

"You won't do this with any other members of the cheer team? I mean, in the future, not anything that happened in the past."

"Who I'm with has to be up to me," I replied. "Obviously, if we were a couple, that would be different. That said, I won't hit on any of the girls on the cheer team, but if they flirt with me, I have to be able to decide for myself what to do, just as you do. The one thing I won't tolerate is cheating or deception, so if you do start dating someone else, even casually, you can't hide the fact that you and I go out, nor can you hide the fact you're going out with other guys. I'm telling you right now I'm going out with other girls, including the girl who's going to visit from Minnesota."

"Is it because I'm black?" Ebele asked.

"No way!" I replied. "It certainly doesn't matter to me, and nobody in my family would care. It really is just that I don't feel it's the right time for me to be in an exclusive relationship."

"When do you think it's right?"

"College," I replied. "And probably after Sophomore year. I mean, it's possible I'll meet the right person before then, and decide, but not during High School. I used to think maybe as a Senior, but even that's way too young. My sister Birgit thinks twenty-five is the soonest, because by then you're out of college, and have worked for at least a year if you got a Master's, or three if just a Bachelor's."

"So, this doesn't mean anything?"

I had to be very careful about what I said, because I didn't want to hurt her, but I also didn't want to imply that it was more than it was.

"It always means something," I replied. "In our case, it means we like each other, are attracted to each other, and enjoy being together. More than that takes time and, please don't take this the wrong way, maturity. I think we're both mature enough to do this, but not mature enough to make a lifetime commitment, if that makes sense."

"A lifetime commitment?" Ebele asked.

"If we were to be a couple, would you plan for us to break up?"

"Well, no," Ebele admitted.

"Do you see the problem? If you 'go steady' as my parents called it, the default is to stay together, and that logically leads to marriage, unless you plan to break up. Well, if you plan to break up, why be an exclusive couple in the first place?"

"I guess that makes sense," Ebele admitted dejectedly.

I wondered if her decision to have sex with me had hinged on the idea that we might be a couple. It certainly hadn't seemed that way, and she knew I'd been

with other girls, including Robin and Estefana, because both of them had revealed that they'd been with me. If she did believe that, then I suspected it was after the fact, and probably because she'd gone further than she'd intended in the 'heat of the moment'.

I suppressed a sigh, because it was entirely possible I'd repeated one of Dad's mistakes. He'd told me about a girl in Sweden who had gotten so worked up that she had sex with him despite wanting to remain a virgin. I wondered if that was the case with Ebele, and if it was what I could do. One thing I wouldn't do was ask her to be a couple, no more than I could 'return' her virginity.

If I'd missed that she thought her virginity was part of a pledge, that was a pledge I hadn't made, and had been clear I wasn't making. Not only that, but her thinking on it appears to have changed *after* we'd had sex, and that reinforced the idea that she'd gone further than she'd intended.

"I'm not sure what I can say at this point except that I'm sorry if there was miscommunication, because I had no intent to do that."

"It's just that...no, never mind."

"You should probably just say it," I said gently. "That's the only way forward."

"I always thought it would be with my first real boyfriend," Ebele said quietly.

I wanted to smack myself in the forehead because that's exactly the kind of thing she should have said *before* she even asked about oral sex. The only thing I could do now is, as gently as I could, point out she'd made the decision.

"I get that," I replied, "and if you had told me that beforehand, we could have talked about it."

"But I wanted...sorry, it's all my own fault."

"We're each responsible for our actions," I said. "I could have asked more questions when you said you weren't sure, or even said 'no' when you asked. But it's also true that what's done is done and can't be undone. I am sorry if I hurt you."

"You didn't," Ebele sighed. "It was my own fault, really."

"So what now?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied.

"How about we shower and then hang out in the main house?"

"OK."

 Albert

"My sister seems to have calmed down," I said to Nicholas when we were playing *Ace Combat* in my room.

"I wouldn't know," Nicholas replied, jinking so I missed my shot. "I avoid her like the plague."

"She's not being a total bitch to everyone, so that's a major plus. How was hockey today?"

"Great! I scored and had an assist, and believe it not, Jesse scored a goal!"

"I thought he always played goalie?"

"He does! But we were up 3-0 and there was no risk of icing because we were on a PK. The puck came to him and instead of just clearing it, he shot it at the net and scored. Coach was pissed, but also said it was a great shot. And the ref saved the puck for Jesse."

"Why was the coach pissed?"

"Because Jesse was supposed to sweep the puck to the corner or bank it off the boards, not shoot straight up the middle. It was risky, but it paid off, and honestly, even if they had got the puck and scored, there would have been just over a minute left. You should come to our games."

"I have a flight team who flies on Saturday mornings on our simulators, with actual ATC and stuff. It's fun."

"Navy fighter pilot and Navy doctor, though I won't go to the Academy."

"UofC for undergrad and medical school?"

"Yes. Then I apply for the military Match. Your mom and grandpa will be a big help in that regard, not to mention all my Navy friends. Did you ever think about the Commander..."

I laughed, "First of all, she's more than twice my age! Second, it's a UCMJ violation. Third, she was one of dad's girlfriends. Fourth, she's married!"

"I didn't say do it, I said think about it!" Nicholas declared.

"I'm a red-blooded, American Adams boy. What do YOU think?"

"MILF. For sure!"

I laughed, "Absolutely! But Jane and I are married, too, remember?"

"I don't think Jesse could marry you when you were both five or six!"

"And the pastor couldn't marry Dad and our moms, either, but that sure didn't stop them!"

"Are you seriously not going to go out with any girls?"

"I'll talk to Jane about going to Homecoming and Prom, and whatever JROTC mixers and events they have, and figure it out. I'll see her next year, and we chat online almost every day. What about you?"

"Just hanging out with the group," Nicholas replied. "I don't want to be controlled by anyone."

"You're going to join the freaking Navy!" I said, laughing.

"OK, I meant a teenage girl!"

"I can get behind that! Jane doesn't control me, we both agree on things. It's kind of like Matthew and Chelsea, but without the fooling around."

"What do you think about Birgit?" Nicholas asked.

"I try not to!" I declared. "Why? Are you interested?"

"She's cute, but she scares me!"

"Birgit scares everyone, including Dad!" I declared.

I managed to get Nicholas' jet lined up and nailed him with an air-to-air missile, winning the dogfight.

"Rats!" Nicholas grouched. "How do you do that so easily?"

"Lots of practice! I need to be able to nail 'Jester' above the hard deck!"

"How many times have you watched that movie?"

"At least a dozen."

"Kelly McGillis is H-O-T!"

"I bet I don't have any instructors that look like callsign 'Charlie!'" I declared.

"Another round?"

"One day I'm going to beat you, Albert!"

"Good luck with that!" I declared.



Birgit

Jesse and his friend Ebele came down into the basement while Philip and I were playing pool and I suggested all four of us play and they accepted. We played with our partners, then switched to boys against girls, Unfortunately, Ebele wasn't very good and that meant the boys won all three of those games. After a total of seven games, we decided to go for ice cream, as we still had three hours before dinner.

"What are you guys doing tonight?" I asked Jesse as we walked.

"Ebele has to be home for dinner, so I was planning to hang out with Albert and Nicholas. Why?"

"Just curious. Philip is staying for dinner and I thought about going out afterwards. Or we could watch a movie."

"Ebele, can you come back?" Jesse asked.

"No. I have stuff to do with my family," she replied.

"I can call Rachel, Tiff, Libby, and Lilibeth," I offered. "Jesse, you could maybe call a few of the guys from the team."

"OK," Jesse agreed. "Let's do that."

We got our ice cream, and while we ate, we called everyone and arranged an impromptu gathering at the house.

"Everyone I called can come over," Jesse said.

"Same here, except Rachel is at Javon's house for dinner and they're doing something with his family afterwards. I have *Big Fat Liar* from Netflix if that's OK."

"Works for me," Jesse said. "Philip?"

"I haven't seen it, so sure."

"We should go to the store and get some snacks," Jesse suggested. "Ebele, we can drop you on the way. I just need to check with Dad that it's OK to take his car. Philip, do you have a license?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because I can only have one person in the car, except siblings, without a licensed driver. You and Birgit would be two, even though she's my sister, and Ebele would be three. You just have to sit in the front passenger seat."

"OK, I remember that law now," Philip said.

We headed home, Jesse checked with Dad, then the four of us got into Dad's car. We dropped Ebele at home, then went to Jewel to get snacks and soft drinks, then headed home for dinner. After dinner, our friends arrived, and we had a great time, and the best part of all was when it was time for Philip to leave, *he* gave *me* a kiss.



October 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

Bob arrived at 11:00am on Sunday, as we'd agreed, and I took him up to my room, but left the door open a smidge so that I didn't send the wrong message before we discussed my concerns.

"The floor is all yours," Bob said, sitting on the love seat.

"And everything else in the room!" I replied, trying to keep things light.

I sat down next to him, but not too close.

"Well, I'M in the room, so I must belong to you!"

I laughed, "Nice one!"

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Us," I replied. "We have a really good thing going and I don't want to mess it up."

"Then why lead me on?" Bob asked.

"I didn't mean to," I said apologetically. "And I'm not saying 'no', I'm just saying I want to talk to you about it. We're good friends and you're my photography buddy, and I'm just afraid that things could get totally messed up and wreck things."

"Birgit," Bob said. "What did you tell me to do?"

"Ask me if I wanted to fuck."

"And what does that mean?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What does that word mean to you?"

"It's sex without any commitments, and just for fun."

"And for some reason, you think I missed your conditions? You made it clear you aren't looking for a boyfriend, and that it can't interfere with photography. I agreed. And it's not like I don't understand the dynamic because you know Meghan and I have fooled around, though we haven't gone all the way. Why do you think it would mess up our friendship if it's just casual?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"If you don't want to, just say so," Bob said.

"No, that's not it," I replied quickly. "It really is that I don't want to mess things up between us and I know guys can get weird about stuff like that."

"Right, because *girls* don't get weird about, too?"

"Sorry," I said sheepishly.

"Birgit, were you telling me the truth about how experienced you are? If you haven't really done it and are nervous, I understand."

"I was telling the truth! Honest!"

"So what's wrong with me, then?" Bob asked.

It wasn't him, and I had no clue why I was freaking out about having sex with him. It was really strange, and I didn't understand it.

"Nothing," I said. "Well, nothing I understand."

"Let me try to help figure it out, OK?"

"Sure," I agreed.

"Have any of your partners been anything other than casual?" Bob asked.

"No. All of them are just friends, nothing more."

"Close friends?"

"No."

Well, Peter and I had known each other since we were babies, but he'd more or less ignored me until he noticed I had 'turned into a girl', as he had put it.

"But I'm a close friend, right?" Bob asked.

"Yes," I admitted.

"I think that might be it," he said. "If we weren't 'photography buddies' you wouldn't be concerned. We'd be in your bed right now."

"You're probably right," I replied. "I'm sorry. Do you still want to?"

"Yes, but we shouldn't. Let's just have lunch, then go to your Hangout."

"Are you upset?" I asked.

"No, and I still want to, but not today. You need to get your head straight and decide if we should just be 'photography buddies' or 'photography fuck buddies'. I know which I'd prefer!"

I laughed, "I bet!"

"I am a guy, after all!" Bob declared. "Let's go have lunch."

I got up, took his hand, and we went downstairs to eat.

 Jesse

"Jesse, your friend is here," Mom Two called down just before lunch while Nicholas, Albert, and I were playing video games.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Ebele," Mom Two said.

I handed my controller to Albert to take over my game and went upstairs. We couldn't go to the basement and have privacy, but it was warm enough outside that we could sit on a bench in the backyard.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I came to apologize for yesterday," Ebele said.

"There's nothing to apologize for," I replied. "You simply told me how you felt, which is what everyone ought to do. You also gave me a good idea of what you wanted, at least at this point, which is a good thing. Then we talked about it, and I think we resolved it as best we can at this point in our lives. And, as I said, there's no going back, only forward."

"I'm not upset, Jesse. I like what we did, and it was fun! My first time was awesome, it was just different from how I thought it would be, and that's not your fault."

"I'm sorry it was awesome," I replied with a smirk. "I won't try as hard next time!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Ebele protested. "And I decided what happened was just fine, especially watching you put it in me the first time."

"There's a bedroom in my dad's house that has mirrors on the ceiling so you could watch," I said.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Now?"

"My brother and Nicholas are here, and then I have my Hangout. After that is our family dinner. How about tomorrow after school?"

"That's great! See you at school tomorrow?"

"Yes."

She left, and I went back into the house and down to the Duck's Nest to finish playing video games with Nicholas and Albert.

 Steve

Kara came to my study, where I was chatting with Jackson, Natalie, and Suzanne.

"Bethany is here," Kara said.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

I shook my head, "I can't meet with her without Tom."

"She said you'd say that, but she said she really needs to talk."

"And I promised Tom I wouldn't try to talk to her without him present. Tell her to have Tom call me."

"I don't think she's going to accept that," Kara said.

"It doesn't matter if she accepts it or not," I replied. "Pass the message and then close the door."

"I'll come with you," Suzanne offered.

The two of them left, leaving Jackson and Natalie with me. Suzanne was back a minute later.

"She's insistent," Suzanne said. "She seems almost manic."

"Do you think she might have some kind of condition?" Jackson asked.

"Stress can do that," I replied. "I'd chalk it up to that before I'd suggest some kind of diagnosable condition."

"Over her book?" Jackson asked.

"Mostly, I suspect," I said. "But she's had a long history of stressful situations, starting with her accident in December 1984. Did she leave?"

"Yes."

I nodded, "Let's join Holly and Antoinette in the great room. The rest of the gang should start arriving any time now."

We left my study and joined the two girls. Antoinette and I had been together before lunch, for what I suspected might be the last time, as she had been asked on a date. I'd still mentor her, as promised, and she'd obviously still attend Philosophy Club, but our physical relationship was likely coming to an end, for the same reason Katelyn and I had suspended our Monday trysts.

That created, what was for me, a somewhat odd situation where my only lovers were living in the house -- Natalie and Yuriko -- and both of those had expiration dates. In less than two years, Natalie would leave for Russia, and unless I missed my guess, would return with a Master's degree and a husband. My relationship with Yuriko would, in all likelihood, last another four years or so, until she returned to Japan upon completion of her Master's degree.

All things considered, I felt that the way things had turned out, and the way they appeared to be going, were a good outcome. Yes, there would be occasional dalliances, but those would be fewer and further between. I was extremely happy with Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne, and things had settled down into a good routine, despite having a bunch of teen and pre-teen kids to create excitement.

"Lost in thought?" Suzanne asked quietly.

"Just thinking about the future," I replied. "And it's good thoughts."

"Ending things with Antoinette, right?"

I nodded, "Very perceptive, Counselor!"

"Not yet!" she declared.

"Sooner than you think," I replied. "Time becomes very different as you age."

"Next thing you're going to say is 'get off my lawn!'," Suzanne teased.

"It's not about acting old, it's about perception of time. In fact, I think that's today's topic."

Others began filtering in and, as usual, we started right on time.



October 21, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Got a minute?" Stephanie asked from the door to my office.

"Sure," I replied. "Your place or mine?"

"Mine, please."

I got up, left my office, changed shoes, and then headed to Stephanie's office where she had tea waiting, along with Liz and Bob.

"Why do I have a sinking feeling?" I asked.

"Because you're not a *complete* idiot!" Stephanie smirked.

"In the immortal words of Birgit, Stephe, and Ashley, 'What-ever!'"

I shut the door, poured myself some tea, then sat down on the sofa next to Liz.

"OK, what's the problem?" I asked.

"Someone circulating offensive humor by email," Bob said.

"Go on," Liz said, looking at me, "get it out of your system!"

Stephanie and Bob both laughed.

"First, humor is *supposed* to be offensive. And while everyone has the right to be offended, I equally have the right not to care."

"You know better," Liz countered.

"Then I'll add 'philosophically speaking'," I said. "Before we get into any details, I refuse to perpetuate the 'Law of Constant Outrage' which is beginning to take hold and allow it to sneak into NIKA."

"Federal law to the contrary notwithstanding?" Bob asked.

"In general, I don't find humor to create a 'hostile work environment'," I replied.

"But you do know it's not *your* definition that matters," Bob replied.

"I'm well aware. Before you identify the individuals sharing it, and by the way, mere receipt does NOT implicate someone, what, exactly, are we talking about? And please do not tell me it's something by George Carlin or Steve Martin!"

"You're a few years out of date on current humor," Liz smirked.

"If what passes for 'humor' now were actually funny, I'd worry about it. But that's about taste, not about offense."

"A list of 'Yo Mama' and dead baby jokes."

"Seriously?" I asked.

"You're surprised?" Bob asked.

"Surprised someone complained! We're all adults here. Poor taste? Possibly. Offensive? Maybe. Hostile? Not even close! May I suggest a course of action?"

"Can we stop you?" Bob asked with a grin.

"No! Write up whoever sent it initially, and whoever forwarded it, for using email for non-business purpose. You can tell whoever complained you wrote them up, but can't go into detail. And tell whoever sent it first, to cut it out, on pain of having to talk to ME about it."

"You owe me dinner, Bob," Stephanie smirked.

"I can't believe you fell for a sucker bet, Bob!" I chuckled.

"My bet was that you would object to doing *anything*, so I thought Stephanie was the sucker!"

"You thought wrong," Stephanie said flatly.

"First offense?" I asked.

"Yes," Bob replied.

"Is there *anything* wrong with the approach I'm suggesting?"

"It's not exactly according to Hoyle, but a written reprimand will suffice. I'd also advise Stephanie to send out a memo reminding everyone that corporate resources are intended only for corporate uses, with the allowance for occasional phone calls."

"It's not that I objected to people having a life, it's what I don't want subpoenaed or found with a warrant. We set up the segregated network so people could bring in their personal laptops and chat or email, or whatever. Ditto allowing personal mobile phones in the office."

"You know that might not hold up, right?" Bob asked.

"We aren't Spurgeon where that's flat out a violation of securities regulations against *any* kind of back-channel communications with monitoring and data retention requirements. None of those devices touches any corporate resource except the internet connection. And if you're going to tell me that's a problem, then I'll start an LLC, which will provide ultra-low cost internet access in the office, via a third party."

"It's a fairly low risk," Liz observed. "But not zero."

"Nothing is zero risk," I replied. "Anyway, I'm assuming you all agree with my strategy?"

"Yes," Stephanie replied.

"No names, but how many people?"

"About three dozen total recipients, but only four who actually sent it."

"Then my advice is to focus on those four, and whoever started it should get a trip to the woodshed. I'd suggest the others just be reminded about the policy with no reprimands."

"Make that happen, Bob," Stephanie said. "Policy violation, not about the content."

"Will do," Bob said. "Need me for the next part?"

"No."

"Good!" He left, closing the door behind him.

"Now what?"

"Just a status update on the audit. The SEC believes we've violated the rules for a closely held corporation. They're proposing a fine -- relatively small, mind you -- and we'd have to make changes to the plan so that all shares are held in trust until the employee leaves NIKA or the company is sold. Basically, the ESOP has to stop issuing shares in individual employee's names."

"Do we have to cure?" I asked.

"Yes," Stephanie replied. "For any shares that were purchased through the ESOP, we transfer them to the trust and they're held in NIKA's name. It's just paperwork. The outright share grants are OK, as there are only fourteen actual shareholders outside the ESOP."

"How much?"

"Fifty-K," Stephanie replied. "Enough for them to say they 'won' and they won't make us sign any kind of consent decree, so long as we pay the fine and cure by December 31st."

"OK. Pay it. Any tax implications in that?"

"No. It's literally a bookkeeping mistake. The only difference is the shares are only allocated on the books of the trust as opposed to actually allocated. It

sounds silly, because the end result is the same, but the regulations don't allow us to do it the way we've always done it."

"Typical," I said, shaking my head. "A regulation which, ultimately, accomplishes nothing other than trapping people who do what appears to be the right thing. Out of curiosity, are we still using the original plan documents that were drawn up by Thad Baker of Allen & Baker?"

"Yes."

"Have someone at McCarthy/Jenkins review those plan documents."

"Already sent to Phoebe Miller," Stephanie said. "Something we should have done when we left Baker & Allen for McCarthy/Jenkins after their financing fiasco."

"True. Is that the conclusion of the SEC part?"

"Yes. We'll sign the agreement to the fine and then submit the revised plan documents and an attestation that we cured. There is one caveat, which you won't like, but it's not negotiable."

"The fucking gag order?"

"Samantha told you about those?"

"Yes. But in our case, we actually did violate their rule, even if it had no material effect, so I'm not going to run to the press to profess our innocence."

"Good."

"Anything from the IRS?"

"Not a thing. I'm sure you've seen how smug Elyse has been. Every single line has proper backup, we recorded everything properly, and we've never made use of any even slightly questionable tax vehicles. According to Elyse, the auditors seem a bit frustrated."

"Good!" I declared. "Though, of course, that makes them determined to find *something, anything*, on which to hang their hats."

"So far, nothing, and you know how fastidious Elyse is about backup for everything."

"Back to the SEC, nothing on the financing arrangements with Samantha?"

"No," Stephanie replied. "She made sure they were properly vetted. We've scrupulously followed the regulations in that area because she can't risk not doing so."

"Because of the SEC's usual nuclear option in those cases -- taking your license and in her case, possibly forcing her into a 'Family Office' rather than being an investment firm."

"Exactly."

"Anything else?"

"That's it," Stephanie said. "You can go be a programmer."

"Thanks."

"And I win *my* bet," Liz smirked.

"Which was?"

"That you wouldn't ask 'who dunnit!'"

"I was more likely to ask who complained, which I do want to know, but I know I'm not permitted to ask."

"For good reason! You'd retaliate."

"One man's retaliation is another man's housecleaning!" I declared. "My only corporate role, besides advising Stephanie, is to preserve the «kami» of NIKA. And people who complain about bullshit stuff because they're 'outraged' or 'offended' are destructive to that end. But I also know the law, and I know we have to follow the law, even when I don't like it."

I downed the rest of my tea, got up, left Stephanie's office and headed back to mine.

"Trouble?" Penny asked.

"That depends. Did you send a list of jokes via the company email servers?"

"No, but someone sent it to me. How much trouble am I in?"

"Zero if you didn't forward it."

"I didn't. But the people who did?"

"Reprimand for violating the policy about using corporate resources for non-corporate purposes. A slap on the wrist. Out of curiosity..."

"The usual dumb collection of 'dead baby' jokes that's been on Usenet forever, along with 'Yo mama' jokes. I deleted it after I skimmed it. Are you upset I didn't tell you?"

"No. Nobody like a «stukach»!"

"Who told?" Penny asked.

"Don't know, and in a way, don't care, except to know that someone doesn't have an appropriate sense of humor and has too thin a skin to work for NIKA."

"I could probably find out," Penny offered.

"I don't want to know because it would be considered retaliation if I were to act on the information."

"Perhaps they could be encouraged to find a new job."

"Don't, please. You'll potentially get yourself in trouble, and that is the last thing we need!"

"You won't let me get into the kind of trouble I want to get into!" Penny smirked.

"Don't you have work to do, Penelope?"

"You're just no fun, Steve! No fun at all!"

 Birgit

"Are we OK?" Bob asked when I arrived at Photography Club on Monday afternoon.

"Why wouldn't we be?" I asked. "It was my problem, not yours. Will you come over on Sunday again?"

"Yes, of course! Work together on today's project?"

"What is it?"

"Architecture in Hyde Park. I thought about shooting windows. There's that famous poster of doors in Chicago, and it gave me an idea to take pictures of unique windows."

"That's cool. But what about me?"

"Think about something unique," Bob suggested.

"Hmm," I said, contemplating. "Maybe porches? I don't think I've seen two identical ones."

"That would work. We could do collages that complement each other, if we pick the same houses."

"Cool!"

That project used up our entire club time, and I had to hurry back to the Lab School to meet Fangsu for the walk to my house to do our homework.

 Jesse

"That was totally cool!" Ebele declared when we got out of bed in the basement guest room at the main house which had the mirrors on the ceiling.

"You like watching?"

"Yes! It made me so hot! You sure like watching me suck you!"

"Also hot!" I declared.

"Can we do this every Monday?" Ebele asked. "I mean, in this room?"

"Unless there are houseguests, sure."

"Cool. We need to shower so I can get home on time."

"What about Spanish?"

"I think I have it down well enough to get an A, so Dad won't have any reason to question me hanging out with you once a week! And we don't have to worry about skipping Friday movies or anything."

"So you're OK with the situation?"

"Yes. I just had to get over my mental block about how I lost my virginity. I do NOT want to find it again!"

I laughed, "I don't think it works that way!"

"Of course not, but I meant not doing it!"

"Let's go shower. We should put on robes because my sisters or brother could be in the house."

"The shower here is really too small for both of us, and I like the showers after."

"We can go to the coach house," I said. "Just slip your shoes on and wear the robe. You don't want your clothes smelling like sex!"

"I'd be SO dead!" Ebele exclaimed.

We put on robes, slipped on our shoes, gathered our clothes, and then left the room. When we walked upstairs, I saw my sisters and their friends in the sunroom studying, but didn't say anything so as not to draw any attention. Of course, that all went for naught when we stepped out into the backyard.

"Ebele Adeoye!" an obviously angry black woman screamed. "What are you doing?"

XXXVII. It's Normal For Teenagers

October 21, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

'Speaking of dead', I thought as Ebele's grandmother advanced towards us.

"Ebele Adeoye!" she demanded. "Why are you carrying your clothes? Explain yourself!"

Actually, I thought, 'dead' might be merciful if Ebele's grandmother was as angry as she appeared to be.

"Why you playing the harlot with this boy and give him what rightfully belongs to your husband?!"

As much as I objected to that kind of thinking, I was certain that I could only make things worth by opening my mouth.

"Ìyá àgbà, let me explain!" she pleaded. ('Grandmother')

"There is nothing to explain! You put on your clothes and come with me! Right now! We shall see about this!"

"Use the powder room in the coach house," I said quietly.

"And you, boy! Your parents will hear about this!"

I almost laughed, but managed not to, because the worst thing that would happen would be a conversation. I was FAR more worried about Ebele's dad and what he might do. I decided to wait until Ebele was dressed before going into the house, as I felt going in with her might make things worse. She was back in three minutes and her grandmother grabbed her arm and literally dragged her from the yard. I went inside, went up to my room, dressed, then started on my homework.

When my moms came home, I went downstairs to tell them what had happened. As I expected, they suggested I talk to Dad, as the odds were that Ebele's dad would call Dad, not them. I went to the main house and found him in his study.

"Got a sec?" I asked.

"Come in, Jesse. What's up?"

"An angry Yoruba grandmother."

"The pretty black girl I've seen at your hockey games?"

"That would be the one," I replied. "Her grandmother showed up when we were walking back to the coach house to shower. We were wearing robes and carrying our clothes."

"What was said?" Dad asked.

"That my parents would hear about it. I suspect from Ebele's dad."

"How old is she?"

"She'll be fifteen in about ten days," I replied.

"OK. I'll let you know if he calls or comes by. A two-year difference isn't going to raise any eyebrows except with unhappy parents. Is this serious or what Mom One calls 'dalliances'?"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Her comment was 'like father, like son' before she sent me to see you! It's a dalliance, though Ebele would like it to be more. I was completely honest with her and we discussed it both before and after."

"And you followed the rules?"

"She's on the Pill and had an STI test."

"That's all I need to know. Thanks for warning me about the impending phone call."

"You're welcome. I'm going back to the house to finish my homework and have dinner with my moms."

I left Dad's study and went back to my room to work on trigonometry homework.



October 22, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve Adams," I said when my private line rang on Tuesday evening after karate practice.

"Mr. Adams, this is Gbadebo Adeoye. I need to speak to you about your son."

"Good evening, Mr. Adeoye," I replied. "What can I do for you?"

"This is something that must be said face-to-face. May I come to your home?"

"Yes," I replied. "Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I do. I will be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Do you drink tea or coffee, Sir?" I asked, electing to be formal.

"Black tea," he replied. "I will see you shortly."

He ended the call, and I went to the kitchen to make the tea. Fortunately, the kettle was still warm, so it would only take a few minutes to whistle, and when it did, I poured water into a teapot through the leaves I'd added to the strainer. Once they were covered with water, I put the lid on, set the teapot and two cups on a tray, added the sugar bowl and small pitcher of milk, and took them to my study. I went to the sunroom and let Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne know I was having a visitor, and asked Ashley to please not answer the doorbell, then went to my study to wait for Mr. Adeoye to arrive.

The doorbell rang, and I went to answer it. I opened the door to see a tall, muscular man.

"Mr. Adeoye? I'm Steve Adams."

I extended my hand, and he shook it firmly.

"Please come in."

He followed me to my study, where I closed the door.

"Please have a seat. Do you take milk and sugar in your tea?"

"Yes, please."

I poured him a cup, added the amounts of tea and sugar Sweeney had indicated were correct, then poured my own, neat.

"How may I help you, Mr. Adeoye?" I asked as I handed him the cup of tea.

"Thank you for your hospitality. I am here on a matter of serious concern. Your son has disgraced my daughter, Ebele, and our entire family."

What I wanted to say is that it took two to tango, but I felt that would only serve to inflame the situation. On the other hand, there wasn't much I could offer by way of mitigation.

"Have you spoken to your daughter?" I asked.

"Her mother and grandmother have, and she confessed to them that she had lain with your son. Does he deny it?"

"You'd have to ask Jesse directly," I said. "He's sixteen, and in our family, such matters are private decisions."

"You have daughters?"

"I do, and yes, the same would apply to them."

"You, as a father, have a duty to protect their virtue!"

"I do not wish to offend, but I disagree. That is a decision that belongs to each individual. I respect your beliefs, and you are absolutely free to practice them. In the same way, I ask you to respect our beliefs and leave us free to practice them."

"And what happens when they marry and their husbands discover they have not remained pure?"

"I would expect my sons and daughters to be open and honest with their prospective spouse."

"And that is sufficient to give your son the right to disgrace my daughter and my family with impunity?"

"Mr. Adeoye, with all due respect to your traditions, we don't see things that way. First of all, despite old wives' tales about the wedding night, there is literally no way to prove or disprove virginity. If you don't believe me, I can bring in my wife, Jessica, a medical doctor, to confirm it for you. And, as there is no way to prove one way or the other, there is, ultimately, no disgrace unless you make an issue of it."

"You would have my daughter lie?" he asked. "And me lie to her future husband?"

"But you cannot, in any way, guarantee your daughter is pure. You can, as now, know she is not, but any assertion you make that she is pure would be based on your own assumptions and biases, because you cannot know. What's the Yoruba tradition with regard to dating?"

"It was mediated, and the couple was not permitted to spend time together until their wedding day. Of course, that has changed because of foreign influences which have given young people ideas which are incompatible with Yoruba

tradition. My daughter obviously has been exposed to corrupting influences, including your son."

"May I ask how you propose to resolve this? Jesse and Ebele obviously are not ready to marry."

"And yet he lies with her! And you are not bothered by this!"

"Purely from my perspective, you're correct. Jesse's decisions in that matter are up to him. That said, I am sympathetic to your concerns about your daughter, even if I disagree with your perspective. But I also don't see any way to restore the *status quo ante*."

"No, it cannot. Ebele's value as a bride has diminished and cannot be restored."

I knew only a tiny bit about Yoruba culture, and had no idea how a dowry or bride price worked, though I objected to both practices. That said, I had not only accepted, but participated in, a Muslim marriage where a «mahr» had been contracted. A «mahr» was different from a 'dowry' or 'bride price' in that the «mahr» was legally the woman's property, and was transferred to her at the time of marriage.

"Most Americans would not see it that way," I replied. "Yes, some religious groups do, but in general, it's not a concern. I'm assuming that you intend for Ebele to marry a Yoruba man?"

"Yes, of course! The continuation of the Yoruba people is very important."

"I'm curious, but do you intend to select her husband?"

"No, but my mother and my wife would help Ebele choose from men of the Yoruba community."

"Does Ebele have any say?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. She will make the decision as to which Yoruba man to marry, though her options are now much more limited."

"Could she marry someone who is not Yoruba?"

"That would be disrespectful."

I felt he was going to be sorely disappointed, as from what I knew of Jesse's friends, those cultural considerations took a backseat to personal desire. Ebele did not remind me of Sakurako, for whom duty, honor, and tradition overrode any personal desires, though the flexibility of Japanese culture with regard to intimacy had allowed her freedom, which Mr. Adeoye did not allow Ebele. But there was one parallel I could use.

"A young woman who works for me, a Muslim, had the same concern about her marriage, and she simply said nothing to her husband in advance, and, to my knowledge, there was no concern, despite the tradition of purity in Islam."

"How would you know that?" he asked.

"I served as «Wali Mukhtar» and stood in for her father to contract the marriage. She was concerned, but after consultation with an Imam, she was advised to simply say nothing."

"That is deceitful!" he protested.

"Not in the Islamic system, as when she is asked if there are reasons not to marry, she has the right to remain silent, and no conclusions may be drawn from her

silence, and her husband may not ask. But I don't know enough about your tradition to say one way or the other. What do you propose to do?"

"Speak with my wife, certainly, but also I do not want your son to be near my daughter, nor do I want her in this house."

"Please make sure she is aware. I will tell Jesse about your wishes and enforce them with regard to being here."

"You choose your words very carefully," Mr. Adeoye said. "I did not hear you say you would instruct your son to stay away from my daughter."

"Jesse chooses his own friends and always has. As I said, I'll ensure he knows Ebele is not to be here, but beyond that, it's up to you to enforce your rules with your daughter."

I left unsaid 'and good luck with that', knowing that teenagers the world around were more like to do the opposite of what their parents demanded they do. That was one main reason I set broad guidelines, and made limited use of strict rules, instead relying on my children making good decisions based on the principles we modeled for them.

"Keep your son away from my daughter," he said firmly. "That is your job as a parent."

It wasn't, but I knew I'd make no headway with Mr. Adeoye, so I decided it was better just to let it go.

"I'll speak to Jesse," I said.

"Thank you for the tea," he said, finishing his cup.

"You're welcome."

He stood, so I stood as well, and walked him to the door. He did shake my hand when I offered, which I took as a good sign. I shut the door behind him, then headed for the coach house.

 Jesse

"Mr. Adeoye came to see me," Dad said.

"How upset is he?" I asked.

"Moderately. Well, maybe more than that, but he was completely controlled, and we had a reasonable exchange of views. He doesn't want Ebele coming to the Compound and is going to tell her to stay away from you. He insisted I tell you to stay away from her, too."

"We don't do that!" Mom Two protested.

Dad nodded and said, "I know. I told him we would enforce his decision about her being at the Compound, but that it was incumbent on him to enforce his rules with his daughter. I made the point that Jesse makes his own decisions about his friends and that we don't interfere."

"I won't go out of my way to talk to her," I said. "But I won't shun her, either."

"What did he actually say?" Mom One asked.

"That Jesse had disgraced Ebele and their entire family."

"Oh, give me a break!" Mom Two exclaimed. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Dad replied. "He said her value as a bride had diminished."

"What a load of crap!" Mom Two replied.

"I don't disagree," Dad said. "But it is their culture. At least he didn't ask for compensation!"

"Would you have paid?" Mom One asked.

"Me?" Dad asked. "No. What Jesse chose to do would be up to him."

"Not a chance!" I declared. "What happened was between her and me and her dad has nothing to say about it! Well, OK, he *did* say something, but it's not like I seduced her or tricked her!"

"You are your father's son!" Mom One declared. "He had his 'dad trouble' when he was just a bit older than you are."

"Aunt Kara's dad, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Mom One replied, "though he had a close call with Ben van Hoek at fifteen."

"If by close call you mean being literally caught in bed with his daughter!" Mom Two declared.

"And nothing had happened," Dad said. "That's what saved my bacon that time. Anyway, Jesse, you make your own decisions, obviously, but please don't invite Ebele here."

"Got it, Pops!" I declared.

"Then I'll say 'good night'."

We all said 'good night' and he left the coach house.

"I'm going up to my room unless there's something we need to talk about," I said.

"Not from me," Mom One said.

"Nor me," Mom Two agreed.

I hugged them both, then went up to my room.



October 23, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"What are you doing on Sunday?" I asked Bob when we met at Photography Club on Wednesday.

"I didn't have any plans. Did you want to do something?"

I leaned close and whispered, "Fuck!"

"I'll check my schedule," Bob replied flatly.

I laughed, "Don't want to seem too eager?"

Bob smiled, "I thought about playing 'hard to get' but that's not a path to success in most cases for guys!"

"Just so long as you're hard!" I giggled.

"Look down," he said quietly.

I did and saw a bulge in his jeans that HAD to be uncomfortable but I was positive would be VERY comfortable when used as designed in the place designed for it!

"I'd offer to resolve that problem, but I don't think Mr. Tavares would approve THAT kind of shoot!"

Bob laughed, "You are SO bad, Birgit!"

"I know! And that's the way it should be!"

Mr. Tavares came into the room, so we had to stop talking. Bob held his camera bag in front of him to hide his obvious erection and sat down at a desk behind me. The session was about portrait composition, and everyone had both a chance to pose and to take photos, which we'd compare the following Monday. When Photography Club ended, Bob and I arranged for him to come to the house at 10:00am on Sunday, and then I met Fangsu for the walk home.

"Can I ask you a question about boys?" Fangsu asked as we crossed 55th Street.

"Sure. What?"

"Why are they such idiots?"

I laughed, "Well, according to my grown up female friends, they say it's testosterone poisoning and I can't argue with that! I mean, have you ever heard a girl say 'hold my beer and watch this'?"

Fangsu laughed, "No, but I hear that girls do dumb stuff when they get drunk."

"Yes, and boys do dumb stuff totally sober! Was there something specific?"

"Just a boy I was interested in being a complete idiot."

"Was interested?"

"He was totally disrespectful to Zahra because she wears a headscarf."

"As dumb as I think those rules are, they should be respected. But I don't think that's a 'boy' thing. My little sister refused to go to a mosque to celebrate a marriage because they required a headscarf."

"Did you go?"

"Of course. It was a matter of showing proper respect for their traditions even if I don't agree with them at all! It's similar to respecting Yuriko's Japanese traditions, even if I would never submit to a man the way she does to my dad!"

"She acts like a servant," Fangsu observed.

"Yes, but that's what she wants to do, so it's fine. Not to mention it's a very subtle way of ensuring she remains in complete control!"

"How so?"

"She discussed how things are in Japan, and while women are submissive on the surface, they actually run the household. Our karate school is run by a very conservative Japanese man, and women aren't allowed to be students. But his wife, my dad's friend Sakurako and her mother are in complete control because

Hideki-san would never do anything without their agreement. Is it like that in China?"

"Modern Chinese people try very hard to be egalitarian, but we do have a history of male dominance."

"I don't mind when certain males dominate me in certain ways!" I declared.

Fangsu laughed, "You are so bad, Birgit!"

"I know! Which boy?"

"Troy Simms," Fangsu replied. "I would never want to be with someone do disrespectful."

"What did he do?"

"Pulled off her scarf."

"Whoa! That's WAY beyond being rude! I mean, how would he like if we pulled his pants down in public?"

"I bet he wouldn't, but you compare those two things?"

"No, but Zahra does, and that's what's important. Nobody is supposed to see her hair except her husband. Well, her dad and brothers at home, of course, but outside the house? Nobody. Again, I don't agree, but it's not up to me! I'd go to school naked on warm days if they let me!"

"No way!" Fangsu gasped.

"Why not?" I asked. "I have a great body and I'm not ashamed of it in any way!"

"But the boys?"

"Would mostly all drool and behave like idiots! The ones who didn't do that, and who were straight, would be the ones I'd want to be with!"

"You'd really do that?"

"Well, first of all, I'd be arrested and expelled, so that's a good reason not to do it. Not to mention how much trouble it would cause for my parents. But you know I use the sauna naked."

"With boys, right?"

"Yes. But I'm totally comfortable with it. You aren't, so you don't do it. And that's perfectly OK. But we should do something about Troy."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But we can talk to Zahra about it. Nobody should be treated that way."

"I agree!"



October 24, 2002, Chicago, Illinois



Jesse

"My dad said your dad said I wasn't supposed to talk to you," I said to Ebele when she sat down next to me at lunch on Thursday.

"I don't care! And that would mean giving up many of my friends, because they go to hockey games and some are in your Friday night group."

"What happened at home?"

"I was told I had disgraced the entire family and that nobody would want to marry me."

I rolled my eyes, "Any guy who would reject a girl because she'd already had sex isn't thinking clearly. Is that some kind of cultural thing? Or religious?"

"Cultural, mostly, though we are Christian, even if I don't go to church often."

"What are you going to do about your dad's rules?"

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"Yes, of course, but I meant Fridays and hockey?"

"I'm not allowed to go out on Fridays and not allowed to go to your hockey matches. And I have to be home immediately after school lets out, except for days when we have cheer practice."

"Are you upset with me?"

"No! It's my dad who's the unreasonable one! We don't live in Nigeria and I told you my opinion on what my grandmother wanted!"

"What did your mom say?"

"She let my grandmother do most of the talking, but I think mom is more understanding than my dad and grandmother. Did your dad or moms say anything else?"

"Only that you shouldn't come to the house, which makes sense, because your dad was clear about that. Otherwise, I'm free to do as I think best."

"You'd want to be with me again?"

"I would, but you know how risky that is, right?"

"Unfortunately," Ebele sighed.

And it really was something I couldn't do until she turned seventeen, because despite it being the case that the government mostly left teenagers alone, they didn't *have* to, and if her dad made a complaint to the police or DCFS, it could create a really bad situation.

"Let's be friends and wait to see what happens," I suggested.

"There really isn't anything else we can do, is there?" she asked.

"No, there isn't," I confirmed.

 Birgit

"Zahra, are you OK?" I asked at lunch.

"You mean because of what happened yesterday?"

"Yes. Troy was totally out of line, and Fangsu, Zaida, and I wanted to be sure you're OK."

"I told my mom what happened, and she advised not telling my dad or complaining to the teachers because my dad would be outraged and might do something foolish."

"Nobody should tolerate that kind of behavior," I said. "And if nothing is done, he'll keep doing it! Boys who abuse girls don't stop unless someone makes them stop!"

"Please don't say anything," Zahra said. "I don't know what my dad might do."

"I wasn't going to talk to a teacher," I said. "But the three of us will explain life to Troy, as in his won't be worth a plugged nickel if he touches anyone that way ever again."

"What does that phrase mean?" Zahra asked.

"Sorry, it's something my dad and grandpas use, and it means something is worthless. It refers to a coin with a hole punched through it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Talk to him tomorrow before school starts," I said. "Trust me! He will not bother you or anyone ever again!"

"Thank you, Birgit," Zahra said. "I know you don't agree with our traditions."

"And you don't agree with mine, but we each respect the other person. Troy did NOT respect you, and he's going to learn the error of his ways!"

"Let's eat!" Zaida said. "I'm hungry!"

We all agreed, and the four of us got into the line to get our lunches.

 Steve

"The IRS gave up," Elyse said happily from the door to my office.

"Closed the investigation?"

"Yes. And accepted our returns 'as filed'."

"That's the best news I've heard all day! When will the changes to the ESOP be completed?"

"There is nothing to do except change the wording of the reports. I should have the new plan documents from McCarthy/Jenkins by Monday. When I issue the annual statements in January, the word 'owned' will be changed to 'allocated' and a single line of fine print will say 'all shares held in the NIKA Consulting ESOP Trust for the benefit of the employee to whom they are allocated'."

"That's it?"

"That's it. I contemplated not even saying anything to the staff, but Phoebe suggested it's better to formally announce the change rather than have the SEC complain later."

"I agree. What did Stephanie say?"

"That it's a «kami» question."

"Full transparency," I replied. "Include that we paid a fine, too."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. The gag order doesn't prevent us from admitting guilt, only from claiming innocence. And we did screw up."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. It's a ticky-tacky regulation that has no *actual* effect on anything. We didn't do anything wrong except write the wrong words on a few pieces of paper. Nobody was harmed, and nothing actually changes except for what you mentioned before. It's a regulation designed to trip people up and give the SEC something to hang their hat on, rather than curing some failure of fiduciary responsibility."

"You know me," Elyse said. "I'm a stickler."

"Yes, I know, but don't beat yourself up over this. It's bullshit, and if there was any chance of having it declared bullshit in the kangaroo courts that are SEC administrative hearings, I'd consider challenging it. But you know full well that the SEC are their own judge, jury, and executioner, and that the Federal Courts basically defer to agency action. The problem, of course, is the Executive Branch executing judicial power, which is expressly forbidden by the Constitution. The 'appeal to the Federal Court' escape clause isn't, because they simply take the government's word for it in nearly every case."

"Which rant is that?" Penny asked.

"It's not," I chuckled. "You'll have to ask Pete to add it to the list!"

Elyse left, and Penny and I went back to work.

 Birgit

"I think I'm ready," Julie said as we walked to my house on Thursday.

"You'll make Peter very happy!" I declared.

"Oh, please!" Julie protested. "He gets to fuck YOU and I've never actually done it!"

"Most guys have a thing about virgins," I said. "Peter didn't get my cherry."

"That's weird, because I would think guys would want an experienced girl."

"I didn't say it made sense!" I giggled. "Just that they have a thing for it! But you've watched so you know what to do!"

"Should I be on top, or should Peter?"

"That's up to you," I said. "What do you want?"

"I think on top because then I can be in control."

"Control is good!" I declared.

"After he does me, he can do you, then you and I can lick each other. OK?"

"OK!"

We arrived at my house and about ten minutes later, Peter arrived. The three of us went up to my room, and I shut and locked the door.

"Peter," Julie said quietly. "I want you to fuck me."

"Are you sure?" he asked, his eyes showing that he really wanted to do it.

"Yes! I'm positive."

"Let's get undressed!" I declared.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Can I get a ride with you?" Maggie asked at the end of play practice.

"I'm OK with it, but we have to ask Gary, because he's giving me a ride home. Mom and Eduardo are both working."

We gathered our things and went out to the curb where Gary, who had graduated the previous year and was attending Waubonsee Community College, was waiting.

"OK to give Maggie a ride?" I asked him.

"Sure. Hop in. "

"You can just drop me at Matt's house and I can walk from there."

About ten minutes later, we got out of the car at my house. I took my bag into the house, let Michael know I was walking Maggie home, then went back outside to walk with her.

"Is Chelsea coming to the Halloween Party on Saturday?"

"Yes. Normally, I'd go into the city, but she's coming here tomorrow after her last class. I take it Mark will be there."

"Yes."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Always."

"What do you think about when you kiss me on stage?"

"Well, the answer is my next line, but I'm positive that's not what you meant."

"It's not."

"You mean do I have fantasies or whatever?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure I should answer that," I said.

"You know I won't say anything to Chelsea," Maggie said.

"Would you answer that question if I asked you?"

"Yes. I'll answer if you do."

I was a bit concerned about what she might say, but I also knew that there was basically no risk because I was completely faithful to Chelsea and Maggie was adamant about her views about any kind of intimate contact before marriage.

"I think the best thing to say is that if Chelsea and I weren't a couple, I'd certainly want to kiss you off stage, too."

"Just kiss?" Maggie asked.

"Well, given you've made it totally clear that anything more than kissing is completely out of the question before marriage, kissing is it."

"I know you don't agree with me, but that's important to me."

"I may not have the same beliefs, but I also support yours and would never, ever do anything that would violate them, even leaving aside the fact that I'd be dead!"

Maggie laughed, "I do agree with Chelsea on that, of course."

"As do I. I wouldn't cheat on Chelsea with you, let alone anyone else!"

"My problem," Maggie said quietly, "is that when you kiss me on stage, I think about breaking my rule."

"I'm flattered," I replied. "As Dad says, fantasies are OK, so long as you know which ones are actually possible and which ones have to remain stored away in our heads, never to be acted upon. Does Mark know?"

"No way! I could never tell him I thought about doing that with you!"

"You realize that being curious is normal for teenagers, right? We're both fifteen, and it would be weird to NOT think about it! Doing it is a different thing, and there's no 'normal' or 'abnormal' because it's such a personal thing."

"I agree, but I don't think about Mark that way when he kisses me."

"I'm not sure what to say about that," I replied.

"Why?"

"Mainly because I'm not a girl!" I chuckled. "I don't think about Mark that way, either!"

Maggie laughed, "You're a brat!"

"I guess the answer is that if you aren't interested in him in that way, you should consider if he's the right guy for you. The challenge you have is that your belief system doesn't allow you to test your theory."

"OK, but you didn't either, because you and Chelsea were a couple before you even thought about stuff like that."

I laughed, "You forget where I grew up! At my dad's house, everyone knew about sex, even if we weren't interested in doing it. Birgit asked Aunt Kara what an orgy was when she was eight or nine!"

"NO WAY!" Maggie protested.

"You *have* met my sister, right?" I asked.

"Well, yes, and she's, hmm...different."

"That's one way to put it!" I chuckled.

We reached Maggie's house, she gave me a quick hug, went inside, and then I began walking home. I wasn't sure what to say to Maggie about Mark, and didn't know how she could resolve that within her belief system except to find a guy she was attracted to. Of course, that was me, and it was mutual, but Chelsea and I were a couple and I was very happy with our relationship. As much as I liked Maggie, I wanted to be with Chelsea, and that was the end of it, no matter what else was true.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Can we do this again on Tuesday?" Julie asked when she, Peter, and I got into my shower.

"Absolutely!" I said. "I have some ideas about other things we can do!"

"Like what?"

"You on top, facing away from Peter, and I lick you and him while you fuck."

"Don't make me think of stuff like that!" Peter protested.

I laughed, "Poor baby! If you need relief, I'm happy to provide it!"

I looked down and saw Peter's dick twitching, so I winked at him, knelt down, and gave him a blowjob to relieve the erection I'd caused. He came in my mouth, but I didn't swallow, standing up to kiss Julie with my mouth full of Peter's cum. We French kissed, sharing his cum, then each gave him a French kiss before swallowing. The look on his face made it clear he didn't appreciate that at all.

"Peter," I said sexily, "don't you think having threesomes twice a week with two hot girls is worth those kisses?"

"It's gross," he said.

"We can stop," I replied.

"Er, uhm, no," he replied, which didn't surprise me in the least.

We finished our shower, dried ourselves, dressed, and then Peter and Julie headed to their own homes.

 Ashley

"Turn your music up louder, please!" I said to Birgit when she came into the sunroom. "I could hear you in my room!"

"I'm not going to apologize for enjoying sex!" Birgit declared. "You'll find out soon enough!"

"I know it feels good! I just don't need to hear you and Julie moaning and screaming 'Yes!' when I'm in my room!"

"Turn up YOUR music then!" Birgit declared.

"I think I'm going to ask Dad for noise-canceling headphones for Christmas!" I said.

"You're just jealous!" Birgit declared.

"I'm eleven!" I protested. "I'm not you and I'm not ready to have sex! But, when the time comes, the guy will have the best sex he'll ever have in his life!"

Birgit laughed, "How would you know give you've never done it?"

"I'm just that good!" I giggled.

"Ashley?" Yuriko said from the entrance to the sunroom. "Would you help with dinner, please?"

"Yes!" I agreed.

I closed my book then went to the kitchen to help Yuriko.



October 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Hi, Troy," I said when Fangsu, Zaida, and I saw him on Friday morning.

"Hi, Birgit! Finally decided you wanted to go out with the best?"

"The best what?" I asked coyly.

"I'll be happy to show you after school!" he leered.

I thought about allowing him to come to the house and messing with him, but I remembered what had happened with the photos we'd taken that had almost got us into trouble.

"You're all talk, but that's not why we're here."

"Then what?"

"If you *ever* touch a girl the way you did Zahra again, you won't be able to show anyone anything because I'll cut off your pin dick and your balls and make you eat them!"

"She's a fanatical Muslim! They flew planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon!"

"No, nineteen complete and utter fucking morons who didn't follow the teachings of Islam hijacked planes. Read the reports! They didn't practice the religion they claimed to be following. But even if they had, how does that implicate Zahra in anything?"

"Because she's a Muslim and they're our enemies!"

"Bullshit!" I declared. "You're obviously free to believe any stupid thing you want, but you are NOT free to touch anyone. I'm serious, do it again, and you'll regret it!"

"I'll do what I want and you can't do a thing about it!" Troy declared.

"You do realize that Birgit is a black belt, right?" Zaida asked.

Well, not yet, but I was ready to test when I decided it was the right time.

"I could demonstrate," I offered. "I've taken down bigger guys than you and sent them to the hospital with testicular damage. So, if you value your balls, and want to keep them attached to your body, you won't bother *any* girls, especially the Muslim ones."

"Get lost!" he said.

"You've been warned," I said. "And I'm going to make sure ALL the girls know so the only dates you'll get are with your right hand, assuming it doesn't reject you, too!"

Fangsu and Zaida both laughed, and we walked away.

"We need to make sure every girl in the school knows," I said. "Tell your friends and make sure they tell their friends."

"You know there are girls who agree with him about us, right?" Zaida asked.

"Unfortunately," I replied. "But we'll see who hangs out with Troy and we'll know who the bigots are. Once we know that, we can refuse to have anything to do with them. Anyway, we need to get to class! See you both at lunch!"

We all went to our class, and as I'd said, we met for lunch, then had our afternoon classes. I watched the clock because I wanted to get home to get ready for my date with Philip. We weren't hanging out with Jesse and his friends, and I hoped that I could get Philip to spend some time kissing, though I didn't want to push too hard and scare him away.

At the end of the day, I hurried to the house and went to my room where I stripped off my clothes, examined my body, deciding that I needed to trim my pubic hair and shave a bit, so I did those things, then showered. Once I showered, I sprayed on my body spray, brushed my teeth, dressed, and then went downstairs to wait for Philip.

XXXVIII. Kara Decides

October 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

Just as I was preparing to leave the office on Friday afternoon, *adium* dinged to let me know I had an incoming chat.

mea_nani9595: Hi!

NIKASteve: Hi Keiki!

mea_nani9595: Busy?

NIKASteve: No. What's up?

mea_nani9595: I booked my tickets for San Francisco. I arrive the afternoon of the 18th and fly home the morning of the 22nd. That's Wednesday through Sunday. I was going to fly home on Saturday, but the ticket was way cheaper if I stayed Saturday night.

NIKASteve: That's normal.

mea_nani9595: Will you come to San Francisco so we can explore an arrangement?

NIKASteve: You don't want to wait to see if you receive any scholarships?

mea_nani9595: It feels like you're trying to talk me out of it.

NIKASteve: I suppose it does. Is what you're asking for what you want? As opposed to feeling obligated?

mea_nani9595: From what Kelli and Nalani said, I won't regret it! I know what the arrangement I want entails!

NIKASteve: As I said to Nalani, I'm happy to help without the *quid pro quo*, so the one thing doesn't depend on the other.

mea_nani9595: It's something I want to do, and I know the

prerequisites from Nalani.

NIKASteve: As long as you're sure.

mea_nani9595: I am. Does that mean you'll come to San Francisco?

NIKASteve: Yes. Let me check my calendar and let you know. You don't need to book a hotel. I'll book a suite at the Mark Hopkins for your entire visit, even if I can't be there the entire time. There will be two beds.

mea_nani9595: You think I might change my mind?

NIKASteve: No pressure. You plan to sleep in your room, and me in mine, unless we agree otherwise.

mea_nani9595: Nalani was right about you! See you in December!

NIKASteve: Sounds good.

mea_nani9595: Bye!

NIKASteve: Bye!

I closed *adium* and sent an email to Liesel at the travel agency asking her to check flight times and to book a room at the Mark Hopkins. Once that was done, I packed up my things and headed home.

 Birgit

Philip arrived at the house just before 6:00pm and I greeted him with a hug.

"Dinner at Medici and then see *The Transporter*?" I asked.

"Whatever you want," Philip agreed.

"I'll hold you to that!" I declared.

"You know what I meant!"

"I reserve the right to take anything you say in the way that best works to my advantage!" I declared. "Let me tell Dad we're leaving."

I went to tell Dad I was leaving with Philip, then returned to the foyer. Philip and I left the house and started walking towards Medici, which was in Hyde Park.

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" I asked.

"I'll be at home in Naperville; why?"

"There's a karate tournament at DePaul and I'm competing. I thought maybe you'd like to come see me compete."

"What days?"

"Friday and Saturday."

"I should be able to. We have our family thing on Thursday, but otherwise we don't have plans."

"Cool! I'll get you the details."

 Steve

"It's just you and me this evening, right?" Yuriko asked, coming to the door of my study.

"As far as I'm aware," I replied.

It was an odd Friday, as both Kara and Jessica were at work events, Suzanne and Natalie were out with the Coven, and the kids are all doing things with friends.

I'd decided I'd just have a relaxing evening at home and write in my journal, read, and listen to music.

"Would you like me to make you something to eat?" she asked.

"Why don't we order Chinese?" I suggested. "There's no need for you to cook."

"OK. And would you like company? I checked with your wives and they agreed you could spend the night with me if you wanted to."

"With the caveat that I need to be up early to walk Jess to work, I'd love to."

"Perhaps you'll still be awake! I intend to pleasure you all night!"

"I'm getting a bit old for that," I chuckled.

"You are a virile man, Steve-san! And you aren't even forty!"

"I will be in about six months!"

"Men much older than you have fathered children, including your own dad!"

I laughed, "True. But that takes five minutes, not five hours!"

"It has never only taken you five minutes! Please order beef kow and almond cookies."

I did as she asked, then she came to sit on my lap.

"I chose not to go home during Christmas break," she said. "I spoke to my grandfather, and he understands. I will go home for the summer, of course."

"You know you're welcome to stay here as often as you like. Did you let Natalie know?"

"Yes. She's happy, and we get along really well. Only Ashley is a better friend."

"The most dangerous girl in the entire Compound!" I declared with a grin.

Yuriko laughed softly, "I think she would agree with you. One look in her eyes and you know she's a troublemaker! The problem is, you don't see it coming!"

"TELL me about it!" I declared. "Birgit is transparent, but Ashley is the most circumspect person in the house, even more than you, and you're Japanese!"

"She knows how to be subtle, something neither Birgit nor Stephie understand! That is the key to true power as a woman!"

"And your husband will do whatever is necessary to keep you happy."

"Of course, because I will keep HIM happy in the bedroom!" Yuriko declared.

"Your husband, whoever he is, will be a very lucky man."

"Yes, he will!" Yuriko declared impishly.

 Jesse

"Where's Ebele?" Libby asked when she arrived at Giordano's. "She was supposed to be here tonight."

"When did you talk to her?" I asked.

"Last weekend. We don't have any classes together, and we're not on the same lunch."

"Her grandmother and dad objected to her being at the Compound and her dad came to talk to my dad."

"Oops! How did you get caught?"

"By being a bit careless because we wanted to shower together after a sauna and decided to go back to the coach house. Her grandmother had come looking for her and saw us in robes carrying our clothes."

"Double oops! What happened?"

"To me? Nothing. Her dad came to talk to my dad, and my dad handled it. Ebele isn't allowed to see me, come to my house, or come out with us on Fridays."

"What about hockey games?"

"Banned."

"Give me a break! What is Ebele doing about it?"

"She talked to me at lunch twice this week, but otherwise she's following her dad's rules, which she pretty much has to, given she's fifteen. Well, she will be next week."

"Bummer. Where's Birgit?"

"With Philip. He's so nervous about being around her because she's fourteen and he's twenty that she decided she wanted a one-on-one date."

"I bet she has more experience than he does!"

"Name a subject I care *less* about than that one!"

"What Mom One and Mom Two do in bed!" Libby smirked.

I rolled my eyes, "I should know better! Where's Lilibeth?"

"With her parents at an outing with her dad's boss. I'm single tonight! Interested?"

"So long as Lilibeth wouldn't object."

"She won't. She wants nothing to do with dicks, but doesn't mind if I get my fill by getting filled! Skip the movie and go back to your house?"

"That works for me!"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"I had a weird conversation with Maggie," I said to Chelsea when we sat down to eat dinner.

"Weird in what way?" Chelsea asked.

"She asked what I thought about when I kissed her on stage."

"And what did you say?"

"The truth! My next line!"

Chelsea laughed, "Yes, AND?"

"That if you and I weren't a couple, I'd think about other stuff, but even then, I know her rules, so I wouldn't actually think about it."

"You don't think about Maggie that way?"

"No. I don't think about any other girls that way! Only you. I've never even kissed anyone besides you. Well, unless you count the stage kisses, which I don't."

"Maggie wants you for her boyfriend," Chelsea said.

"And she knows you and I are a couple and are permanent."

"Did she tell you what she thinks about?"

"That's the weird part," I replied. "She said she thinks about sex with me. And then she said she never thinks that way about Mark, even when they kiss for real. She asked what I thought, and I said I didn't think about Mark that way because I'm a guy."

Chelsea laughed, "You can be a real brat, Matt!"

"That's what Maggie said! Anyway, I told her that if she doesn't think about doing it with Mark, then maybe he's not the right guy for her."

"Would you? I mean, if we weren't together?"

"That's not even a remote possibility, because Maggie isn't going to do it before her wedding night."

"OK, but if she did..."

"Sorry, that's a 'hypothesis contrary to fact' fallacy and it can't be answered."

"I knew you going out for the speech team was a bad idea!" Chelsea said lightly.

"Honestly, I don't think about Maggie that way because I don't think about anyone that way except you. And before you ask, I am VERY happy with our sex life, you totally satisfy me, and I have no desire to even think about being with another girl."

"Show me how much you love me after dinner?"

"By doing the dishes by myself?" I asked with a smirk.

"Brat! You know what I meant!"

"I did!" I agreed. "Now eat, so I can take you to bed!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Are you going to be at the Halloween party next Saturday?"

"Yes. I plan to wear my SCA clothes. Your dad won't object to me wearing my épée and having my *main-gauche*, would he?"

"No, he won't. Nobody who is there will freak out, and pretty much everyone knows my dad has a concealed carry license and carries his Beretta most of the time."

"In Chicago?"

"In Chicago. He had his handgun before they passed the ordinance in 1982, so it's fully regular and he has all the licenses and permits he needs."

"Why does a karate instructor need a handgun?" Philip asked.

"Would you use a screwdriver to drive a nail?"

"No."

"That's why. Want to come to the house?"

"It's really a pain to get to the L. If I had a car, it would be so much easier."

I was frustrated by that, but there wasn't really a solution unless Philip got a car. That said, he would be at the party in a week. Which raised an important question.

"Are you taking the L to my house for the Halloween party?"

"Yes."

I had an idea, but I had to be very careful so as not to scare Philip away.

"I can ask Dad if you can use one of the guest rooms," I said. "Then you could stay the night and not have to worry about the L. Someone could give you a ride in the morning."

"You're sure it'll be OK?"

I wanted to roll my eyes because Dad would be OK if Philip stayed in MY room and fucked me all night!

"Positive," I replied.

"Are you going to wear a costume?" he asked.

"What would a princess wear?" I asked. "Or an empress?"

Philip laughed, "Well, Mi'lady, there's a shop in Lincoln Park where you can find suitable attire for your royal station."

"And don't you forget it!" I giggled. "I'll get Dad to take me there before next weekend. What's the address?"

He gave me the address which I memorized, then he walked me to the train. Once I had boarded, he left for the L so he could go back to IIT.



October 26, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Did you get any sleep at all?" Jessica asked on Saturday morning as Kara, Suzanne, and I walked her to the hospital.

"No, because Yuriko spaced out our activities and gave me massages in between. I'll sleep for a couple hours after breakfast before Jesse's game, then take a nap before dinner. It's not Guys' Night this week, so we can be in bed at a reasonable hour."

"You need to follow your sleep rule, Tiger. It's important."

"Yes, and last night was important for Yuriko," I replied. "It's a balance, and you know I don't violate my sleep rule very often and with the new recipes from Alex, I don't even make small violations of my diet rule."

"We'll make sure he naps," Kara said.

"Alone!" Jessica declared.

"I sleep better cuddled with someone," I protested. "And I'm sure Kara can restrain herself until this evening."

"Perhaps," Kara declared impishly.

"You're zero help, Honey!" I teased. "By the way, I heard from Keiki, and she'd like me to be in San Francisco on December 18th, which is a Wednesday, and stay through Sunday."

"You sound a bit unsure," Suzanne observed.

"It's the whole idea of the 'arrangement' that is bugging me."

"You were OK with it with María Cristina," Kara countered.

"Yes, but there was no *quid pro quo*. I tried to make that clear to Keiki, but she equates any help I've given her with having sex."

"It's that she feels she 'owes' you, isn't it?" Jessica asked.

"Probably," I replied. "I think she has a significant chance of receiving sufficient scholarships based on her grades, family finances, and the fact that she's female and a native Hawaiian."

"But doesn't that remove the 'owing sex' impediment?" Suzanne asked.

"I suppose so," I replied. "But I'm concerned about her mindset, not the technicalities."

"Let me put on my future lawyer's hat," Suzanne said. "And say suggest it's an equitable trade, entered into by consenting adults. If you think about it, in one sense, it's a relationship similar to the one you have with Yuriko. An outside observer could look at it and say that she's exchanging sex and domestic service for a place to stay."

"Or," Kara tittered, "that Yuriko is exchanging domestic service for sex!"

"Do you mind?!" Suzanne asked with faux annoyance. "I'm trying to make a point!"

"And I'm just being me!" Kara declared impishly.

"As I was saying," Suzanne said with a smile, "she doesn't feel she *owes* you, but is offering an exchange of value. And in YOUR world, every relationship is about an exchange of value. Neither Kara nor I are legal wives, but we, in effect, contracted with you for a lifetime relationship that involved sex, companionship, pooling of finances, and in Kara's case, children. You made similar arrangements with Natalie and Yuriko, though time limited. The same was true for María Cristina, though that ended sooner than you expected because she met Mike Knox."

"A reasonable point," I replied. "I'll think about it. In the meantime, I did book tickets and a suite at the Mark Hopkins."

"Two beds, right?" Jessica asked.

"Very perceptive."

"You're nothing if not cautious about your dalliances and deflowerings," Kara said. "And your stable of available girls has dwindled significantly!"

"And that's not a problem," I replied. "As I said to Doctor Brown at Mayo, I'm in a different stage of my life."

"Until the Girl Gang turns fifteen!" Kara tittered.

"And you know my take on that," I replied. "It's something I'll consider, but unlike in the past, it's not a sure thing, and will depend on a number of factors."

We reached the hospital and Kara, Suzanne, and I all hugged and kissed Jessica, and after she'd gone into the hospital, the three of us headed home.

 Birgit

"Cuddle time!" I declared when Dad came into the house after walking Mom to the hospital.

Dad smiled, and we went to the sunroom so we could cuddle in our usual spot on the chaise.

"I need to go to a costume rental shop in Lincoln Park," I said. "I want a princess costume to go with Philip's outfit he wears for his SCA meets."

"I think we can manage that," Dad replied. "Are they open today?"

"I'm not sure. I'll call when we get home from karate. Are you wearing a costume?"

"The double-breasted blue pinstripe suit I wore when I went to Cincinnati."

"The gangster outfit, right?"

"Yes. Your moms will dress as my gun molls."

"You could put your gun in my holster!" I said invitingly.

"Birgit..." Dad said.

"I promised I would tease you mercilessly for the rest of your life! And it's going to be a long one, so get used to it!"

"I'm not sure I'll ever be used to you, Pumpkin!"

"You love me, Dad!"

"Of course I do!"

"Would it be OK for Philip to use one of the guest rooms after the Halloween party?"

"That's fine," Dad said. "Unlike the New Year's Eve party, everyone pretty much goes home, so I haven't had any requests. You've been seeing a lot of him."

"Not enough!" I giggled.

"I meant time you're spending with him!" Dad protested.

"Oh," I said flatly.

"You're as bad as I am!"

"And you won't let me show you!" I replied. "I like Philip, but he's, well, a typical nerd."

"So, not much experience with girls?"

"He hasn't discovered that girls are more fun than computers, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the SCA!"

Dad laughed, "I figured that out at fourteen!"

"And with someone ten years older!" I said quietly.

"And you keep your inferences to yourself, young lady."

"You and I are the only ones here and I'd never say anything to Foo."

Dad laughed, "I haven't called him that since he and Chelsea became a couple."

"You're skipping karate this morning, right?"

"Yes, for Jesse's game. I'll be at my afternoon class, though. Will you be there?"

"Yes, but then I'm going into the Loop. My gang is meeting at Rachel's for dinner. Girls only!"

"Breakfast is ready," Yuriko announced.

"Be there in three minutes," Dad replied.

I snuggled close and enjoyed the rest of my cuddle time.

 Jesse

"What do you think about Mount Carmel?" Nicholas asked as we dressed.

"They'll give us a good game," I replied. "We just have to play our game and not give them any good chances. They have a couple of snipers and our D needs to cover them like a blanket. And we need at least three goals. Mount Carmel scores three goals on average, and has never scored less than two. The advantage we have is their goalie is ranked seventh in the league."

"And you're ranked first!"

"Any new girls today, Block?" Pete asked when he came into the locker room.

"Just the usual group," I replied.

"Your harem! I can only dream!"

"Will that hot blonde from your church be here today?" Freddy asked. "And can you introduce me?"

I laughed, "Her dad is a deacon and wouldn't approve. Heck, he doesn't approve of me and I'm Orthodox! She won't be here because her dad doesn't want her to see me."

"Well, if he's worried you'll pluck that rose, I bet he's WAY too late!" Tomás declared.

"No comment," I replied. "A gentleman does NOT discuss that."

"Cut the chatter, men!" Coach Nelson said.

Every one quieted down, and he gave his usual pre-game pep talk, and went over Mount Carmel's strengths and weaknesses, which matched what Nicholas and I had discussed a few minutes earlier. Once he finished, we headed out to the ice to warm up. I saw the usual girls in the stands, though Ebele wasn't with the cheer squad. Most of the softball team was there as well.

"We should have a team party with the softball team!" Freddy suggested as we stretched. "Could you host it?"

"Maybe," I replied, thinking about the 'sauna incident'. "Focus on the game now!"

"We're going to kick Catholic butt today!" Tim declared.

"Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu doesn't matter!" I declared. "We're going to kick some opposing butt!"

"There are some butts in the stands I'd like to get my hands on!" Freddy declared.

"You need a cold shower before the game starts!" Nicholas observed as we got up to skate warm-up laps.

 Steve

"Any fallout from the Ebele situation?" I asked Jennifer as we watched the teams warm up.

"No," she replied. "Jesse's annoyed with Ebele's parents and grandmother, but he's said she's sat with him at lunch twice this week."

"That's fine, obviously, but there is no way he can bring her to the Compound nor go to her house."

"He's aware," Jennifer said. "But Josie and I will remind him that his ebony goddess isn't worth the risk."

I laughed, "She is absolutely gorgeous, but then again, so are Viktoria, Scarlett, Brooke, Adi, Akiko..."

"I doubt you could list them all," Josie interrupted. "I sure can't!"

"I have the official list if you're interested," Libby said with a smirk.

"Jesse's Elyse!" Jennifer declared. "And I don't know if I want to know!"

"Twenty-nine, for those keeping score at home!"

"Like father, like son!" Jennifer said, shaking her head.

"Gee, Jen," I chuckled. "Why the head shake? You were responsible for a good number of those!"

"Melanie corrupted both of us!" Jennifer declared.

"True," I agreed. "And unless I miss my guess, Libby is playing that role as well!"

"I may have introduced Jesse to girls, and may have encouraged his wild side," Libby said.

"I think I'm going to sit next to Mom One!" Lilibeth said. "SHE isn't interested in that any more than I am!"

"We did make Jesse the usual way," Jennifer countered. "But that was a special situation."

"No chance," Lilibeth said. "Never."

"Which is totally up to you," Jennifer replied. "But Steve and I loved each other and wanted to make Jesse."

"And have lived to regret it, right?" Natalie teased.

Everyone laughed and almost immediately the horn blew to signal it was time for the teams to clear the ice so the game could begin.

 Jesse

It was a hard-fought game, and I gave up two goals, but we scored three, including one by Nicholas, who received a game puck, along with Freddy who had blocked half-a-dozen shots which only added to his black-and-blue marks from the previous game.

"Dude, way to throw your body out there!" I said as we showered.

"I need some TLC from one of those girls on the softball team!"

"Telling me won't do any good," I chuckled. "I'm sure not into that! You could ask Tim!"

"Oh, HELL no!" Freddy declared. "Tim's a great guy, but no way!"

"Guys are SO much easier to deal with than chicks," Tim said. "No periods, no mood swings, and they're into hockey, football, and basketball."

"All yours, Dude!" Pete said. "One hundred percent! I'm with Freddy."

"I didn't know you guys were a couple! Are you out?"

"I meant I agree with him!" Pete said, flustered.

"You just don't know what you're missing!" Tim declared.

"And we do not intend to find out!" Freddy replied.

We finished our showers, dressed, and I headed out to meet my moms and Libby.

"Jesse?" Luna called out.

"Hi, Luna! What's up?"

"If you're not busy this afternoon, I thought you might want to hang out."

"What about your dad?"

"He's married, but you never know! Ask him if you'd prefer him to me!"

I laughed, "That's not what I meant and you know it!"

"Ever since he started playing poker with your dad, he's mellowed. He won't say anything as long as we stay out of the sauna."

I laughed, "You realize how silly that is, right?"

"What he doesn't know can't hurt you or me!"

"Come by the house," I said. "I'll be there."

"See you about 1:00pm!"

She walked away and Libby leaned close.

"I'd say she's a suitable substitute."

I just laughed, shook my head, and then the four of us headed to Mom One's car for the drive home. Once we arrived, I put my gear in the drying room in the basement and Libby and I had lunch with my moms. Luna arrived at 1:00pm, Libby left to hang out with Lilibeth, and then Luna and I went right up to my room.

"Freddy suggested a party with the hockey team and softball team," I said as we took off our clothes.

"We could do that, but I'm not sure if everyone would be allowed to come here."

"Even if we said 'no sauna'?" I asked. "And maybe have my dad invite your dad to hang out during the party."

"Chaperones?"

"Cover!" I replied as we climbed into bed. "They won't bother us, but you can safely tell the other parents that your dad will be there. He and my dad can drink bourbon and hang out and we can have run of the house."

"I'll talk to the girls and find out if that will work. I guess that means no orgy!"

I laughed, "If we want to be SURE the parents never let us get together again, that would be the thing to do! And I don't see you doing that!"

"Not even close! Now, shut up and fuck me, please!"

"¡Sí, señorita!" I exclaimed.

 Steve

"How are you doing?" Avanti asked as we relaxed in the sauna after karate class.

"Aren't I the one who's supposed to ask you that question?"

"I know what I want," she replied. "You aren't sure."

"What makes you say that?"

"Body language, mostly, but also you seem overly cautious when speaking to me. You're reconsidering my request for you to initiate me."

A statement, not a question, and a potentially accurate one. Avanti and I had become close, and met one of the key criteria for girls under the Illinois age of consent -- her mom's approved. That wasn't determinative, but it did weigh heavily on a decision either way. More important was my approval from my wives, especially Jessica, which I also had.

But that was only about permission, and there was much more to my decision-making process than that. The challenge was that I didn't fully understand my reluctance. I was certainly attracted to Avanti, and in the past, the combination of attraction and obvious consent would have been sufficient.

It no longer was sufficient, and as I thought about it, I wondered if it had to do with Birgit and her unequivocal desire to have sex with me. It was also the case that I was thirty-nine, and the age gap was now tremendous, with teenage girls being the same age as Jesse, Birgit, or Matthew. I knew many girls felt I was 'too old', and in a way I agreed with them. That said, Avanti not only didn't think that was true, but it was also a major plus for her.

"That's both true and not true," I replied. "I think I've developed a small mental block that has to do with the fact that I have kids older than you."

"You realize Birgit believes we've already been together, right?"

"Birgit believes a lot of things that diverge from reality!" I chuckled.

"Is age so important?" Avanti asked. "And don't I have the right to choose an older lover if I think that's best for me?"

"Yes, of course you do, but as the saying goes, it takes two to tango."

"I think the only answer I can give is that I'm mature enough to make that decision, and am, already, older than you were when you took your first lover."

"Your mom talks too much!" I chuckled.

"Something you say when she's revealed information which helps a point I wish to make."

"Busted," I chuckled. "And I agree you are mature enough to make that decision."

"Then any concerns you have are about you, not about me."

"Who's the guru here?"

Avanti smiled, "You have much to teach me, but that does not mean I cannot teach you."

"You're right, of course."

"Of course!" she exclaimed.

 Birgit

"Dad, Avanti is coming to the Girl Gang dinner tonight, so she's staying. Could she come with us to the costume shop?"

"Yes," he replied. "I just need to talk to your mom for a minute, then we'll go."

He walked away, and I stepped close to Avanti.

"How dumb is my dad being?"

Avanti laughed, "He's just being himself, if what my mom says about him is true. What kind of costume are you getting?"

"A medieval princess! A long, flowing dress with a conical cap with gauze material hanging from the point. Or something similar."

"Have you had any luck with Philip?"

"No. He is staying over after the party, so I'm hopeful."

"Is he staying in your room?"

"If I have my way! But I said he could use a guest room. Are you coming to the party?"

"No. I have plans with my parents. But Mom and I convinced Dad we should come to the New Year's Eve party."

"Cool!"

"Ready to go, Pumpkin?" Dad asked.

"Yes!"

We left the house, got into his BMW, and headed for the shop in Lincoln Park. At the shop, I told the clerk what I wanted, and she showed me the perfect pink outfit.

"Everyone will have to bow down and worship me!" I declared when I tried on the dress and cap and examined myself in a three-way mirror.

"In your dreams, Pumpkin!" Dad teased.

"You have NO idea what I dream!" I whispered.

Dad laughed, "Oh, I think I do! Is that the costume you want?"

"Yes! It's perfect!"

Dad filled out the rental form and paid the clerk while I changed back into my clothes. The clerk put the dress into a carrying bag and the hat into a box, and we went back to the car for the drive home. Once we arrived home, I put the costume in my room, then Avanti and I left the house to head to Tiffany's so the three of us could walk to the train together.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"I love the black lights!" I said to Arby when we went to the basement of his house. "Now I understand why you said everyone should wear something white!"

"It was actually my dad's idea," he said.

"Is everyone going to be here?"

"Supposedly," he replied. "Nobody declined."

Mark, Maggie, Josh, Matt W, Ryan, and most of the rest of the drama group were already at the house, along with some girls from the speech team. We had a great time with our friends, and just after midnight, Chelsea drove us back to my house.

"I had a good talk with Maggie," Chelsea said as we got ready for bed. "I think she's going to break up with Mark."

"That doesn't surprise me," I replied. "After the conversation the other day, I was pretty sure that was going to happen."

"She absolutely wants you, but you're taken!"

"I may have protested at age five, but that was fairly short-lived!"

"Once you discovered what you can do with girls?" Chelsea asked.

"I always knew! It was just that I found my sisters to be so annoying, I figured ALL girls were like that! I discovered that they aren't!"

"Your sisters are awesome!"

"You didn't have to live with them! And let's forget about my sisters and focus on us!"

"Deal!"



October 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I think I've overcome my concerns about Keiki," I said as Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, and I walked to the hospital on Sunday morning.

"Avanti?" Jessica asked.

"She made a perfectly valid point about maturity and I realized that I might be falling back into the same trap I was in when some of the girls accused me of substituting my judgment for theirs and treating them as if they weren't consenting adults."

"But within the rules we set, right?"

"Yes. I'm not asking for any change in what we discussed."

"May I suggest one slight modification?" Kara asked.

"What?" I asked.

"That any girls under eighteen have to come to Jess, Suzanne, and me and ask for express permission. It's not about you not managing your sex life, but setting some guardrails, so to speak. A girl who can't come to us and ask isn't ready for the 'Steve Adams Experience!'"

"I don't have a problem with that," I said. "I already needed your permission for girls under eighteen, and that makes sense because I don't always exercise the best risk analysis in that regard."

"Your fetish for teenage virgin pussy is strong, Tiger!" Jessica declared.

"Not as strong as it used to be," I replied. "I commented to Avanti that I think part of it is having kids in that age group."

"That actually makes sense, given the situation with Birgit," Jessica said.

"And as I said," Kara responded, "that had more to do with what Birgit wanted, not the thing in and of itself. We couldn't allow it for the very obvious reason that Birgit would have done her level best to form some kind of exclusive relationship with Steve. She didn't just want to fuck, she wanted HIM, body, mind, heart, and soul."

"And she has three of those four!" Suzanne declared.

"In *her* mind," I countered. "The Empress of the Universe believes I'm her subject! She's wrong."

"Liz is your one true empress!" Kara teased.

I laughed, "And as I said to Birgit, I pay Liz for the privilege of obeying her every command!"

"She's been a very good *Consigliere*," Suzanne observed. "Not being your wife allows her a bit more freedom to drop the hammer than we have."

"You know I don't object to you voicing your opinions," I said. "And all three of you have put your foot down at one time or another."

"Yes, but we also have to consider harmony in the complex relationship that is our four-way marriage. Liz doesn't have to, so she doesn't need to concern herself with what others think and synthesize a joint approach to whatever challenge presents itself."

"A reasonable point," I replied. "Why do I get the sense there have been some disagreements between the three of you?"

"Because we're three different women, all of whom love you and each other. That calls for compromise on all our parts, and we feel it's incumbent on us to put forward a unified front."

"And when you can't?" I asked.

"Then Kara decides," Jessica replied. "But that has only happened on one occasion, and not an important one. And no, you do not get to know!"

"As long as the three of you are happy with our marriage."

"Of course we are!" Jessica declared. "Right wives?"

"Yes!" Kara and Suzanne exclaimed.

"And you're happy, right Tiger?"

"Very."

"Then everything is right in the world! We'll implement Kara's plan, which means you have to send any girls under eighteen to us for permission, and our word is law."

"Understood. Does that include Avanti?"

"No. We won't interfere with that in any way. You know the likely source of the challenges."

"Some of Birgit's girl gang," I replied. "And Amber."

Kara laughed, "Amber will show up at the house on her fourteenth birthday with a clean STI test and notarized permission from Penny!"

"That would violate the rule we set for fifteen," I protested.

"And it's the one exception I would consider, given who she is and who her parents are."

We reached the hospital and after hugs and kisses, Jessica went into the hospital and Kara, Suzanne, and I began walking home.

"I might have a candidate for my fantasy," Kara said. "She's nineteen. That is, if you're still interested."

"I told you I would fulfill that fantasy at any time, so long as Jessica and Suzanne didn't object."

"We don't," Suzanne said.

"Then arrange for me to meet this young woman and we'll see what happens," I said.

"I will!" Kara said happily.

At home I cuddled Birgit, had breakfast, then went to my study to check my personal email. While I was reading, my *adium* chimed.

Etheldred: Hi!?

NIKASteve: Hi Audrey! How is school going?

Etheldred: I need a break! And some serious relaxation therapy!

NIKASteve: LOL! There must be some competent therapist on campus!

Etheldred: None that hold a candle to you! You should visit OSU. I know a dozen girls who could use the kind of therapy you provide!

NIKASteve: And you'd willingly give up time with me?

Etheldred: No! That said, I have been seeing a guy that seems pretty good so far, but we haven't gotten to the foot massage stage just yet!

NIKASteve: Cute! What's his name?

Etheldred: Brad. He's a grad student I met about a month ago. He's planning to do research in nuclear medicine.

NIKASteve: That's cool. Sounds like he might be a keeper!

Etheldred: Do NOT say that! I am not ready for that anytime soon!

NIKASteve: How's Burger King?

Etheldred: Dealing with the public is NOT my thing! At least not the fast food clientele. I have a shift in about two hours.

NIKASteve: Remember what I said.

Etheldred: That no job is unworthy of respect. And I still say you are weird, and yes, that is known! Any chance I could visit during Christmas break?

NIKASteve: You're always welcome. I'll set aside a guest room for you. Are you bringing Brad?

Etheldred: That wouldn't bother you?

NIKASteve: Why would it? What we've done is fun, but it's not permanent. Bring him, if you're at that point.

Etheldred: Cool! I'll get you details. Gotta run! Bye!
NIKASteve: Bye!

XXXIX. Sleeping Beauty

October 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Hi!" Bob said when he arrived at the house just after lunch.

I was frustrated because he'd been delayed by his parents, so I took his hand and basically dragged him upstairs to my room, where I shut and locked the door.

"I want to fuck!" I declared.

"That's quite the change in attitude from the last time we were here!"

"Well, we can discuss the finer points of feminine thinking, or I can give you a fantastic blowjob and then you can lick me, then fuck me as many times as you can get it up!"

"Hmm," Bob smirked. "Talk to you or have sex. Can I think about it?"

"Only if you want to never be able to have sex again!" I growled.

"Well, in THAT case, then I think I'd like to see what you've been hiding under your clothes!"

I giggled and quickly stripped off my clothes, then struck a pose. Bob's jeans bulged even more than they had at Photography Club and I was positive they were downright uncomfortable.

"Your turn!" I declared.

Bob began undressing slowly, taking his time to hang his shirt on the chair by my desk and drape his pants over them. I crossed my arms and tapped my foot, but that didn't make him go any faster. He was purposefully trying to annoy me by a role reversal, but I'd find a way to get even! When Bob *finally* got naked, he put his hands on his hips and looked at me, his nicely sized dick standing straight up.

I moved over to him, put my arms around him, and gave him a deep French kiss while grinding my clit against his rock hard shaft. After a minute, I broke the kiss and gently pushed Bob back onto the love seat and knelt between his legs. I looked up, winked, then took him halfway into my mouth in one quick motion. Bob groaned, and I thought he might cum instantly, which is why I'd done that, but he didn't.

I released him and began licking him like an ice cream cone while slowly pumping with my right hand. I could tell from the twitching and his breathing that he wasn't going to last long, so after about a minute, I took him into my mouth, and began bobbing and sucking while running my tongue around his shaft and glans, and stroking him with my right hand.

He groaned again, and knowing he was super close, I cupped his sack with my left hand, bobbed, sucked, licked, and stroked, then gently squeezed. That was enough to push him over the edge and a powerful jet of cum spurted into my mouth. That made me instantly very wet, and I swallowed, then bobbed faster, sucking harder, all the while stroking his shaft and gently squeezing his sack. Bob groaned again as several more jets of cum blasted into my mouth. Following the adage that 'when he orgasms is when the sucking truly begins', I kept going for a full three minutes after the last small spurt of his cum.

"Jesus!" Bob gasped when I finally released him.

I stood up, then sat in his lap, and said, "Birgit, not Jesus! But I am a goddess!"

Bob laughed, and then I gave him a deep French kiss with some of his cum still on my tongue. He didn't recoil, and as his tongue tangled with mine, I felt his right hand on my left boob. He rubbed my nipple, and I moaned softly into his mouth, feeling even more wetness and a VERY empty spot between my legs! But before he filled me, I wanted his tongue on my clit! I broke the kiss, stood up, grabbed Bob's hand and let him to my bed, which already had the comforter turned down.

"Worship me!" I demanded impishly.

Bob smirked, "My tongue and my dick will pleasure thee all the days of my life!"

I laughed at the reference to the Bible and decided on one of my own.

"Well, you were certainly like the cedars of Lebanon and I have a goblet overflowing with wine from which you should imbibe!"

Bob's mouth and tongue felt SO good on my nipples that I thought he might make me cum just by licking and sucking them and playing with my other nipple with his hand. He spent five full minutes on each boob before he began kissing his way to the 'Holy of Holies' in which he'd better stick his tongue, as I did NOT want a foot massage!

"Ungh!" I groaned when his tongue found my engorged clit.

Bob's mouth and tongue had felt great on my boobs, but they felt even better between my legs, and it was obvious that either Meghan or Mariana, whichever had been the previous recipient, had taught him because he had NO trouble bringing me to orgasm. I put my hands on the back of his head and pulled him

into me as I pushed my hips up to increase the pressure and had an absolutely amazing orgasm. I felt him push a finger into me and groaned again, as my pussy clamped down on his finger as his tongue lashed my clit.

"More?" Bob asked smugly when my first orgasm had passed.

"If you stop now, you die!" I growled. "Unless you're hard again, that is!"

"Rock hard!" he declared.

"Then get that thing in me, NOW!" I demanded. "I am positive you can figure out what to do!"

"Any idiot can figure out what to do!" Bob declared. "It's doing it right! I may need some tips!"

"I don't just want the tip, I want the whole thing! NOW!"

"Maybe I need a break," Bob teased as he moved on top of me.

"Just kiss me and fuck me! NOW!"

Bob laughed, and I felt him reach between us, rub his glans along my labia, then push into me. I wrapped my legs around him, put my heels on his thighs and thrust my hips up to meet him. Bob got the clue and pulled back and pushed all the way into me as I pushed my hips upward. It felt SO good to have him inside me, and I began moving my hips to clue him in, and soon enough he began thrusting into me at a slow, steady pace.

I spread my legs as wide as I could and moved my heels to his butt, allowing him to get deep and to ensure he pressed against my clit each time he was fully

inside me. We fucked slowly and steadily for about five minutes before I broke the kiss.

"You can go faster, but grind against me every five or six strokes," I suggested.

Bob was a quick learner and about a minute later, I had a huge orgasm, my pussy squeezing his shaft tightly. That was enough to push him over the edge, and he shoved deep into me as spurts of warm cum bathed my insides.

"Not bad for a rookie!" I teased when both our orgasms had run their course. "Stay inside me until you get soft, OK?"

"Sure," he agreed, then kissed my nose. "Thank you."

"Orgasms are all the thanks I need!" I giggled. "And I'll have lots more before dinner! And so will you!"

"So why the change in attitude?"

"It wasn't really," I replied. "It was just me having to get over my concern that it might mess up our friendship. I realized you're mature and could handle it, and that made the decision easy! I have NO complaints!"

"Me either!" Bob declared. "My first blowjob and first fuck on the same day!"

"And as soon as you're soft, your first sixty-nine until you get hard enough to fuck me again!"

"Trust me," Bob declared. "That will take all of about ten seconds if you use your mouth!"

I laughed, "Boys and blowjobs! It's a good thing I love giving them!"

"And I love how you taste, too!"

"And soon you'll get to taste two great tastes that taste great together!"

"You got pussy juice on my cum!" Bob declared.

"You got cum in my pussy juice!" I responded mimicking the commercial for Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.

We both laughed and a minute later when Bob slipped from me, I guided him into a sixty-nine position with me straddling his face and my face over his groin. He wasn't off by much, as he got completely hard within a minute. I didn't wait for him to give me an orgasm, but lifted off, turned, and impaled myself on his shaft, groaning as my pubic hair came in contact with his.

"Just let me," I said.

Bob nodded, and I proceeded to ride him, giving myself four good orgasms before he came, demonstrating awesome stamina, though after cumming twice that wasn't surprising. I stayed on top of him until he softened, then we sixty-nined and I had him fuck me doggy-style. After sixty-nine again, I had him sit cross-legged and impaled myself on him and rode him gently. The final time, I had him fuck me hard and fast, after which I led him to the shower.

"Only five times?" Bob asked with a smirk.

I laughed, "Six if we do it in the shower!"

We did, with me against the wall and Bob fucking me hard from behind while I rubbed my clit and he tweaked my nipples. After we both came, we washed ourselves, then got out of the shower and dried off.

"Every Sunday?" I asked.

"Sign me up!" Bob declared.

"You can invite Meghan if you want," I said. "I'm happy to put my tongue in her holy of holies!"

Bob shook his head, "You are unbelievable!"

"Why?" I asked. "Can't a girl have a strong sex drive?"

"Sure, but you're fourteen!"

"And you're sixteen! You fucked me six times, and that was *after* a blowjob!"

"My usual problem is that it won't go down!" Bob chuckled. "As for Meghan, I'm not sure. You're OK with me telling her about today?"

"Yes, but only her. I'll only tell one friend."

"Darn!" Bob grinned. "I was going to offer stud service!"

I laughed, "Now you sound like my dad!"

"I sure wouldn't mind having three wives and two girlfriends!"

"Good luck with that," I giggled. "I don't know anyone else who can pull that off, and you need the right girls!"

"So are you bi?" Bob asked.

I shrugged, "I don't like labels, and I strongly prefer being with guys. I've been with girls one-on-one, but it's not the same without a dick! That said, threesomes are awesome. You'll find out if you invite Meghan!"

"I'll talk to her and see what she thinks."

"Why don't you bring her to the Halloween party we're having next Friday? I have a date, so she could be your date. It's costume optional, but if you don't wear a costume you have to wear one of those masks that conceal most of your face. We have them, so you don't have to get one."

"Let me check with my parents. What time?"

"7:00pm to 1:00am, usually, but if they need to get you earlier, that's not a problem."

"I think my mom or dad will need to talk to one of your parents and then they'll talk to Meghan's parents."

"That's cool. I'll give you my dad's number and let him know. Same time next Sunday?"

"Perhaps you'll be on time and I'll give you a VERY special opportunity!"

"I'll do my best, but it's up to my parents and I don't think I should tell them what I was doing here today!"

"Mine would just roll their eyes and shake their heads," I giggled.

I walked Bob to the door, we kissed, and he left. I turned to find Ashely smirking.

"You look completely and thoroughly fucked!" she giggled.

"I took a shower and my clothes are arranged properly!"

"Oh, wait, it was the moaning and groaning I heard from your room! You didn't turn on the music!"

I laughed, "Maybe you need to ask Dad for the noise-canceling headphones BEFORE Christmas!"

"I think I do!"



October 28, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I need to find a boyfriend," Fangsu said when we sat down with Zaida and Zahra for lunch at school on Tuesday.

"There aren't any guys here that you like?" Zaida asked.

"No. I've talked to some guys, but none of them are acceptable."

"You should ask Birgit's brother Jesse to introduce you to the guys on his hockey team!" Zaida suggested. "There are some totally hot guys, and Jesse could tell you which ones were nice."

"What do you think, Birgit?" Fangsu asked.

"It certainly can't hurt! Most of the guys are cool and Jesse could tell you which ones weren't, as Fangsu said."

"I wouldn't mind being Jesse's girl!" Zahra declared.

"That's a song, right?" Zaida asked.

"Yes," Zahra replied. "By Rick Springfield from *General Hospital*."

"Jesse has a *lot* of girlfriends," I said. "He's not interested in being a couple."

"Just coupling?" Zahra giggled.

I laughed, "He's my brother, so I'm not even going to think about what he does with his girlfriends!"

"What about you?" Zaida asked. "Have you?"

"Yes. More than once, too."

"Whoa!" Zahra exclaimed. "Seriously?"

"Seriously!" I declared. "I'm guessing you haven't?"

"It's against my religion," Zaida said.

"For me, too, Zahra said.

"I'm not religious, but I haven't either," Fangsu added.

"What's it like, Birgit?" Zaida asked.

"Imagine feeling better than you've ever felt before, multiply that by ten, and it's better than that!"

"My mom said it's painful the first time," Zaida said.

"It shouldn't be," I said. "I know you aren't interested in doing it, but you should read a book called *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*."

Zaida laughed, "Who said I'm not interested? I just said it was against my religion!"

I laughed, then said, "Sorry."

"But I also don't think I should do it before I get married."

"I know that's what our religion teaches," Zahra said, "but if it's as good as Birgit says..."

"But what about your husband?" Zaida queried.

"That's the problem, really," Zahra replied. "I don't know."

"And people wonder why I'm not religious?" I said, shaking my head. "Any guy who would be upset that I've had sex wouldn't make a good partner. Not to mention there is no way in this or any other life I'd marry a guy without going to bed with him first!"

"Seriously?" Zaida asked.

"Seriously. I mean, what if you aren't compatible?"

"Uhm, if he's a boy and you're a girl..."

I laughed, "OK, yes, the parts fit together. But it's more than that. Let me bring you copies of the book, and you can read and learn at your own pace."

We finished eating and went to class, and at the end of the regular school day, I met Bob at Photography Club.

"Meghan will come to the Halloween party," Bob said. "My dad will call your dad so he can tell her dad everything is cool. We'll have to be picked up at midnight, but Meghan's dad will do that."

"Awesome!"

We went into the classroom and waited for Mr. Tavares.



October 29, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I think I'm ready to test for my black belt," I said to Sensei Will on Tuesday evening.

"You've spoken to your dad about that?"

"He knows. He said you have to convene a board that doesn't include him."

"Correct. Do you want to wait until after the Thanksgiving tournament?"

"Could I test and you not award the belt until after the tournament?"

"Assuming you're going to pass?"

"Yes, Sensei!" I declared. "I wouldn't take the test if I didn't feel I was going to pass, and you wouldn't convene a promotion board if you didn't believe I was ready!"

"You are every bit your father's daughter!"

"Thank you!"

"Let me see when Sensei Molly, Sensei Ichirou, and Sensei Sharon are available. Are you going to miss any Saturdays before Thanksgiving?"

"No, Sensei!"

"You lead the class today, then, please, including assigning instructors."

"I like being able to tell my dad what to do!" I giggled.

"Along with every OTHER teenage girl on the planet! And how often are you successful?"

"Not as often as I would like!"

"Well, for the next hour, he is yours to command."

I only wished that were true because I could command him to do that one thing I really wanted but couldn't have. Of course, the dojo was totally NOT the place for that, so I was doubly out of luck.

"Yes, Sensei!"

"Let's go to the training room."

Sensei Will and I went to the training room, and I took the primary position in front of the class. I led everyone through our usual meditation about Sensei Hiro, then led exercises, and finally assigned instructors. I had Dad work with the brown belts, which included me, on sparring, because I knew that would be the most difficult part of the test. I *so* wanted to make a comment about him pinning me to the mat, but with the other students there, I couldn't do that.

I knew it could never happen, but teasing Dad was fun, and I'd had a chance to 'get it out of my system' with Peter and Julie before dinner. Of course, what I really wanted, besides Dad, was Philip, but that was a work in progress and might take some time. In the meantime, I'd also have Bob, who was a very quick learner. I was sure at some point he and Meghan and he and Mariana would get together, and then he might end up being one of their boyfriends. But until then, I was happy to have him fuck me six ways on Sunday!



November 1, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Friday, on the way home from work, I stopped at the 7-Eleven to get several bags of ice for the party. When I arrived home, I put the ice in coolers and the kids stocked them with beer, wine coolers, and soft drinks. We ensured everything else was ready, then had a nice dinner prepared by Yuriko. Ashley, Albert, and I did the dishes, and had just finished when the first guests began arriving. I went upstairs to my room, put on my 'gangster' suit and my white fedora, got the toy Tommy Gun from the shelf, then joined my wives in the attic room.

"I half expected you to wear just the mask," I said to Cindi when she arrived.

"Don't think I wouldn't!" she declared. "This bod still has it at forty! But can you imagine the reaction of the teenage boys?"

"I'd be more worried about what their parents would say," I replied. "There will be plenty of teenage girls to take care of the other problem! Where's Walt?"

"Parking the car at the dojo. He was kind enough to drop me at the house. How many people are going to be here?"

"Around a hundred, though the kids are mostly hanging out next door at Penny's."

"Except the ones who want dances with Steve!" Kathy, who was also wearing a mask, declared, coming over to us. "Including my two daughters."

"I bet they want to dance!" Cindi smirked. "At least if they're anything like their mom!"

"No comment!" Kathy replied.

She gave me a hug and a peck on the lips, then hugged my wives and Cindi.

"Where's Kurt?" I asked.

"Downstairs talking to Pete, Jamie, and Terry."

"I love the suit!" she said. "And the white fedora is perfect!"

"I actually bought these for the opening of Joyce's brother-in-law's hotel in Newport, Kentucky."

"How are Joyce and Jake?" she asked.

"They're doing well. Do you know if Tom and Bethany are going to be here tonight? He wasn't sure when I asked last week."

"She said 'no'," Kathy replied. "She was miffed you wouldn't speak to her when she was here last week."

"Tom and I agreed that he'd mediate any conversations," I said. "And I have to keep my word with Tom."

"I agree," Kathy said. "Bethany is not in a good place."

"Hi Uncle Steve!" Alexa said, coming over to us.

"You get bigger every time I see you!" I replied.

"That's the problem," Sofia said, coming up behind her daughter. "You feed them and they get bigger!"

"How old are you now, Alexa?" Cindi asked.

"Twelve!"

"My girls are next door," Kathy said.

"OK to go next door, Papa?" Alexa asked.

"Of course," Stavros replied. "Behave."

"I won't do anything Birgit won't do!" Alexa giggled and scampered away.

"«Herre gud!»" Sofia said, shaking her head. ("Oh, Lord!")

I laughed, "Good luck with *that* one!"

"I was thinking about sending her to the Orthodox Monastery of the Dormition in Pennsylvania!" Stavros declared. "But I don't know if it would survive!"

"I've been there, and the place didn't burst into flames, so you never know!"

Sofia and Stavros laughed, and went to get something to drink. More and more guests arrived, and I put on one of the mix tapes Jesse and Birgit had made, though it was actually a CD burned on his laptop rather than an actual tape. I danced with my wives, then with Kathy, then with Cindi, then Yuriko, then Natalie, and not long after that, a parade of young women starting with Birgit. She was followed by Kathrine Jaeger, Amber, Ashley, and then Kristin Jaeger.

"I have some fond memories," Kristin said as we swayed to the music.

"As do I!" I replied.

"Would you like to reprise our first time together on my next birthday?"

"On one condition," I chuckled.

Kristin laughed softly, "I knew you'd say that, and yes, I'll grow it back! But you have to shave me afterwards, because that's for you only."

"An honor and a privilege."

"I'll have to figure out a time so we can use my bed," Kristin said sexily.

Of course, just thinking about that had me instantly hard, and I was positive she intended that.

"I see you miss me," she said saucily, grinding against me.

"You're evil, Miss Jaeger!"

"I know!" she exclaimed. "I'm in good company!"

The song ended and Kristin's friend Erika immediately replaced her.

"Trouble?" she asked with a smirk, pressing against my painful erection."

"You two are dangerous!" I chuckled.

"And you love every minute of it!" Erika declared.

"True."

"July 5th is a Saturday. I'd love a reprise of my first time!"

"I sense a pattern here!"

"And after you repeat our first times, you could have us both again!"

"I was mistaken," I said. "You two are EXTREMELY dangerous!"

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"Yes."

When the song finished, I made my way back to my wives.

"You haven't lost your touch!" Jessica declared. "You're still popular!"

"And they haven't lost their touch either!" Jessica tittered using her eyes to direct Kara's and Suzanne's to the obvious bulge in my suit pants.

 Birgit

"Let's dance," I said to Philip.

We'd danced to several fast songs, but now a slow song was playing. He nodded, though he seemed reluctant, and I led him to a corner of the basement where I put my arms around him. He put his arms stiffly around me, and I stepped right up to him, pressing my boobs into his chest and wrapping my arms around him. As we swayed to the music, I felt him getting hard, but he shifted so I wasn't touching that part of him and looked uncomfortable.

"I'm not upset," I said quietly. "That's *supposed* to happen when we dance this way."

"You're fourteen, Birgit," he replied equally quietly.

"I have a secret for you," I said, then put my lips close to his ear, "I'm not a virgin."

When I moved my head away from his ear, I saw a shocked look on his face and wondered if I'd made a big mistake. We finished the dance and went to get something to drink. Philip was still very uncomfortable, so I suggested we go upstairs and he reluctantly agreed. I led him to Uncle Terry's study and shut the door so we could have some privacy, knowing Uncle Terry would be OK with it.

Unfortunately, closing the door seemed to make Philip even uncomfortable, as well as nervous.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I said.

"I, uhm, I could go to jail for even kissing you," he said.

"First of all, I'm not going to tell, and if someone did say something, my response would be to say I have no idea what they're talking about. We haven't kissed or even held hands in public. And you know my parents are OK with me seeing you."

"Seeing me, sure, but..."

"That, too," I replied. "You might not believe me, but it's true. My mom took me to get the Pill, and she knew when I lost my virginity. So does my dad. Seriously, it's not a problem."

"But if anyone ever found out..."

"Well, if I don't say anything and you don't say anything, how could they find out?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Philip, can I ask you a question?"

"I guess."

"Have you ever made out with a girl? I mean, more than just a goodnight kiss?"

"Er, uhm, er," he stammered, making the answer clear without saying it.

I wasn't sure how to respond or what to do, but being me, I felt I had to take the bull by the horns, though not *the* horn, which would freak him out. Instead, I took one of his hands in mine and squeezed it.

"Come sit on the couch with me," I said. "Let's kiss. And that's all, I promise? OK?"

Philip actually laughed, which I felt was a good sign

"Isn't the guy supposed to say stuff like that?"

"Yes, but this is role reversal because I'm experienced, and you aren't, right?"

"Right," he said quietly.

"Come sit with me and kiss, please."

I tugged gently, and he actually moved with me to the big leather couch. I had him sit down, then sat in his lap, carefully avoiding to large bulge in his pants and touched my lips to his. After a few seconds, he kissed back and we had a nice make-out session that lasted about ten minutes.

"OK?" I asked.

Philip smiled, "You kiss really well."

I almost said that I did *lots* of things really well, but decided not to press my luck. Instead, I suggested we go back downstairs, and he agreed.

 Steve

"Will you dance with me?" Tiffany Moran asked. "Mom said it was OK to ask."

"Yes," I replied, looking over to Julie, who just rolled her eyes.

I took Tiffany's hand, and we began dancing to *All Out of Love* by Air Supply.

"What are you doing March 2nd?" she asked.

"I'd have to check my calendar," I replied. "Why?"

"I know the rules, but I need to ask you so I can plan for a very private party with you on the day after my fifteenth birthday, which is March 1st."

"You'll need to check with my appointment secretary," I said.

"Huh?" Tiffany asked, confused.

"You're under eighteen, so you need permission from my wives. You'll have to ask Kara."

"Really?" Tiffany asked.

"Really."

"OK," she said, dropping her arms and quickly walked away to where Kara was standing.

I saw the look on Kara's face, and knew Tiffany had simply asked bluntly, and about ten seconds later, Tiffany returned to finish the dance.

"I need to come talk to her before March," Tiffany said.

"I'm curious..."

"I went up to her and asked if it was OK to have you fuck my brains out."

I chuckled, "Why am I not surprised?"

"Because I'm positive you knew how badly I want to fuck you!"

"I might have had that idea! You know you can't say a word about it to anyone, right?"

"Suzanne was totally clear about that. I won't mess it up!"

We finished our dance, and I went back to where Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne were standing.

"You might not survive that one," Suzanne said with a smirk. "She's wanted it for ages and if that pent up desire is uncontrollably unleashed, look out!"

"Kara?" I asked.

"I should have said I wanted to watch!"

"She's horny enough she'd say 'yes!'" Jessica declared.

"Hmm!" Kara said.

"Be smart, Honey."

"You're just no fun!" Kara faux whined.

"He isn't, is he?" Penny asked, coming over to us. "But I do want to dance with him."

"He's all yours!"

"I wish!" Penny exclaimed as she led me to the middle of the dance floor.

 Jesse

"I talked to my dad and the girls on the team," Luna said. "I think we could all come to a party with my dad here, as you suggested."

"How about the 16th?" I asked. "I can ask the guys after the game tomorrow."

"I think that will work!"

"OK. I'll verify with my dad in the morning, but I'm sure it'll be OK. Don't invite anyone until I check with him. Will you be at the game tomorrow?"

"Yes. Most of the team will be there. Just hockey and softball, right?"

"It's your plan, and that's fine with me."

"Great! Want to dance?"

"Sure!"

"Horizontally?" Luna asked.

I chuckled, "I'm the host, but let me check with Birgit and Nicholas, and if they don't mind me disappearing for half-an-hour, sure."

"Only half-an-hour?" Luna pouted.

"Why don't you just come over tomorrow after the game and you can have four hours?"

"I suppose I can wait! Let's just dance!"

I took her hand, and we went to the dance floor.

 Steve

"Would you like to dance?" a girl I didn't recognize asked.

She was wearing a mask, so I couldn't see her face, but she had long black hair and a perfect 'Steve type' body. I nodded, took her hand, and we stepped onto the dance floor. A fast song was just finishing and the next song was *I Don't Wanna Live Without Your Love* by Chicago. The young woman stepped into my arms and we swayed to the music, her arms tightly around me and her head resting on my chest.

When the song ended, she didn't step away and the next song was *In The Air Tonight* by Phil Collins, so we continued our slow dance. About halfway through the song, she lifted her head and put her lips close to my ear.

"I hear you're the best," she said quietly.

If there was any ambiguity to her statement, she made clear what she mean by squeezing her arms tightly and rubbing her body against mine.

"So I've been told," I replied.

"Show me?" she whispered urgently. "I have a clean STI test and I know you had a vasectomy."

"What's your name?"

"Call me Talia," she said.

I was positive that was a pseudonym and a reference to the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale.

"Sleeping Beauty?" I asked.

"Yes. And if you know that, you know how she was awakened!"

And if she conformed to the fairy tale, then I'd gather her 'first fruits' and be, once again, the Luckiest Dumb Boy on the planet.

"She slept through the encounter," I chuckled. "And it was one of her children who actually woke her up."

'Talia' laughed, "I was conflating stories!"

"There are several competing versions," I replied. "Have we met?"

"I know you, but you don't know me."

Which could mean several things, but if she was one of Kara's students or a medical student, she was off limits. I had the very strong impression that she didn't intend to reveal her identity before our encounter, and maybe not even after. My first instinct was to decline, but the idea of an anonymous encounter was actually intriguing for reasons I didn't understand.

"You're over eighteen, right?"

"Twenty-one," she replied as the disc ended.

The idea was so erotic that I wanted to, but I also had to be cautious.

"Ask me to dance in about an hour," I replied.

"OK," she agreed.

I left the dance floor and went over to my wives, who were standing with Sofia, Kathy, and Jackie. I asked if I could borrow my wives, changed the CD to one that began with *You're the Inspiration* and I led the three of them to the middle of the floor where we put our arms around each other, hip to hip in a tight circle.

"Who was the girl?" Kara asked.

"I was going to ask the three of you. She said her name as 'Talia' but that's a pseudonym."

"That's the princess from *Sleeping Beauty*, right?" Suzanne asked.

"Very good, future Counselor!"

"I'm not just sexy college pussy!" she tittered.

"And let me guess," Jessica said, "it's not her finger she wants pricked!"

"So it would appear," I said. "She said she has a clean STI test and that she's twenty-one. She says she knows me, but I don't know her. And she knows I had a vasectomy."

"Wait! She wants to be anonymous?" Jessica asked.

"That was the impression I had. It's strangely erotic for reasons I can't discern. Did any of you put her up to this?"

"No," they all replied.

"My concern is that she's one of Kara's students," I said. "She's too young to be a medical student, but she could be a student nurse."

"I don't think any of my students would know you except Kayla," Kara said, "and that's not Kayla."

"And I don't think we have any nursing students in trauma with long black hair and an athletic build," Jessica said. "I don't think she's off limits by our rules. Would you be OK if you never know who she is or will that drive you nuts for the rest of your days?"

"As I said, it's weirdly erotic, and I don't believe I'd obsess over her identity."

"How did she ask?" Kara inquired.

"She said she heard I was the best..."

"Truth!" Kara declared interrupting me.

"...then she asked me to show her. I asked some questions, including her name and she confirmed the *Sleeping Beauty* reference. And, of course, if she's truly conforming to the fairy tale..."

"No way!" Suzanne exclaimed. "A virgin? Talk about Luckiest Dumb Boy!"

"That's the key," Jessica said. "Tiger can't turn down tight virgin college pussy!"

"I was in High School!" Kara declared.

"Me, too!" Suzanne added.

"It just took me longer to find him!" Jessica said. "But it was worth the wait!"

"Tight medical student pussy is every bit as good as High School or college pussy!" I chuckled.

"If she has an STI test, I don't see any reason to say 'no'," Jessica said.

"Me, either," Suzanne said.

"Bed her well, Snuggle Bear!" Kara added mirthfully. "Or should I say 'Ulrich'?"

"Playing «Darmok» with me?" I asked with a grin.

"I prefer the planet where they make love at the drop of a hat!" Kara declared impishly.

"Where Wesley gets *arrested* instead of getting laid!" Suzanne added.

"One thing is for sure," Jessica said, "Tiger has NEVER had to go to a girl's door and beg!"

"I see 'Darmok' is not just for boys any more!" I observed.

"No, it's not!" Kara declared. "What are you going to do?"

"Let me think more about it," I replied.

 Albert

"Let's go play video games," Nicholas suggested. "Peter and Eric are bored, too."

"Let me just tell Jesse in case any parents come looking for us."

I did and then the four of us left Aunt Penny's house and went back to my house and up to my room.

"I don't have any four-player games," I said. "But I have my computer, my PS2, and my old Sega. Jesse said I could borrow his Nintendo GameCube, and we could get the family Xbox from downstairs."

"I want to dogfight," Nicholas said. "But not against you!"

I laughed, "I understand."

"I'll fight you, Nicholas," Eric said.

"Well, that covers the PS2," I said. "Peter, let me get Jesse's GameCube and we can play *FIFA World Cup 2002*."

"Sure!"

I made sure that Nicholas and Eric got into *Ace Combat 4*, and then I quickly went to the coach house and down to the Duck's Nest and got Jesse's GameCube, controllers, and the game and went back to my room. Fortunately, I had two TVs so we could all play at the same time.

"Are you going to get *FIFA 2003*?" Peter asked as I set everything up.

"For sure! It came out in Europe last week, but we won't get it here until the 12th. I already reserved a copy."

"Eric, is your mom designing any cool buildings?" I asked as we started playing.

"She's working on a new courthouse for some suburb, but I don't remember which one. It's pretty cool with lots of glass and interesting shapes. Dad is still doing boring lawyer crap that would make me throw myself off one of mom's buildings!"

"What do you want to do?"

"Join the Marines, but please don't tell my mom. She'll go nuts. Your mom is cool with you going to the Academy, right?"

"Absolutely. She's a little freaked out when Commander Aimee lets me take off and land, but otherwise she's cool."

"I wish my mom was cool about it," Nicholas said. "She basically forbid me from going into the Navy."

"You're going to medical school first, right?" Eric asked.

"Yes," Nicholas replied. "UofC for undergrad and med school, then Residency in the Navy."

"What about you, Peter?" Eric asked. "Computers like your mom and dad?"

"Anything but that!" he declared. "I'm thinking about chemical engineering. I spoke to Aunt Kara about it and it sounds interesting."

"So same as Birgit, then?" I asked.

"Maybe," Peter said. "She goes back and forth between chemistry teacher and chemical engineering."

"Gotcha!" Nicholas declared as I heard an explosion and Eric groan.

"You still have to beat the big dog!" I chuckled.

"One day, Albert!" Nicholas declared. "One day!"

 Birgit

Bob asked me to dance late in the evening and I readily agreed.

"Meghan is interested," Bob said. "But she wants her first time to be just us two. Does that bother you?"

"No way!" I declared. "You're free to do what you want and I'm free to do what I want. We just have our regularly scheduled Sunday worship service!"

Bob laughed, "Somehow I don't think any church would be OK with that kind of worship!"

"Don't be so sure! There was a guy named David Berg who had a cult in California called *The Family of Love*. They recruited guys through something they called 'flirty fishing' where cute girls go out and entice guys into the cult with sex."

"Sign me up for that church!" Bob declared.

"What? The First Church of Birgit isn't good enough for you?"

"It's great but if she can worship at other churches so can I!"

"I was teasing, obviously! Just remember that anyone you're with has to have an STI test, even if they're virgins. If not, then you have to have a test AND wait before we can do it again."

"I'll make sure Meghan has a test before I show her the secret you showed me!"

"As the silly TV commercials say -- but wait, there's more!"

"The special opportunity?" Bob asked.

"Only if you're actually on time!"

"I'll do my best!"

The song ended, and I went back to Philip and asked him to dance. I really wanted him to sleep in my bed, but mentioning the STI test to Bob had reminded me I hadn't said that to Philip, and there was no way I could take that chance. I was also positive he wasn't ready for that. Of course, I realized that if I was wrong, and he DID want to sleep in my bed, he couldn't, and he'd be upset.

I had almost let my desire run away with me and cause me to make a dumb mistake. But now I had to figure out how to ask Philip to get a test. But that was a problem for another day.

 Steve

"Want to dance?" 'Talia' inquired.

"I do," I said. "Let me change discs and put on a slow song."

When the current song finished, I swapped discs and put in a disc that started with *Just the Way You Are*, then led 'Talia' to the dance floor. As before, she stepped close, wrapped her arms tightly around me, and rested her head on my chest. We swayed to the song until near the end when she lifted her head.

"Do you want to?"

"If you're sure that's what you want," I said. "You know I'm married, right?"

"I know," she said with a smile. "I came here tonight for one thing, and one thing only -- to have a night of pure passion with you."

"And what would that entail?" I asked.

She put her lips close to my ear and whispered, "Take me around the world, then ravish me any way you want until morning!"

XL. Talia

November 1, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Will you answer one question?" I asked.

"You'll have to ask it before I know if I can answer," Talia replied.

"Who provided the five-star review?"

"A good girl gone bad," Talia said. "And that's what I want! I'm a good girl who wants to be bad. Very bad!"

That provided a clue, and my first thought went to Tabitha, but it could equally well be Hope or Becka, though Becka or Hope would likely have said something in advance. I thought about the 'good girls' I'd been with -- Kara, Sandy, Ruth, Michelle, Lena, María Cristina, Vickie, and Tabitha -- I couldn't really eliminate anyone except Michelle, though I was reasonably certain Kara was not involved.

Hair color might or might not be a clue, as Talia might, or might not, be related to the person who had told her I was 'the best' and had informed her she needed an STI test, and revealed that I'd had a vasectomy. In the end, though, it didn't particularly matter, except to satisfy my curiosity.

"How good?" I asked with a sly smile.

"My dance tonight with you was my first ever, and what they told me growing up appears to be correct! Dancing *does* lead to sex! And before that first dance, not even a hug. You'll be my first. For everything."

This was one of those 'die and go to heaven' opportunities that only arose because I was, as Stephanie had asserted, the Luckiest Dumb Boy on the planet. I couldn't imagine a better scenario unless the young woman in my arms were a twin and her sister were available as well.

"Just one more question," I said. "Why?"

She smiled, "I think the answer is simple."

She put her lips close to my ear and sang, just above a whisper...

*They say there's a heaven for those who will wait
Some say it's better, but I say it ain't
I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints
The sinners are much more fun*

"And," she whispered, "I know you're fully functional in every way, and capable of multiple techniques; a broad variety of pleasuring."

I couldn't help but laugh because whoever it was had clued her in about me, had clued her in about 'Darmok'.

"That line was uttered by Tasha Yar, and Tasha is a diminutive of Natalya, the same as Talia. And you seem very well informed!"

"Just because I'm a 'good girl' doesn't mean I'm clueless! And it's time for you to make me a *very* bad girl!"

I took her hand and led her from the attic room, choosing to take the elevator down to the ground floor. When the elevator reached the first floor, I opened the door and led Talia to the room off the kitchen, which my wives called the Playroom. I shut and locked the door, which led back to the kitchen, then led Talia into the bedroom. I put on a jazz CD in the shelf stereo, and pressed 'Play', then turned to Talia.

"I remember what you said before," I said. "Any other requests or any limits?"

"No limits," Talia replied. "I want you to ravish me however you want, in any way you want, all night. And, yes, I know what I'm asking for."

I was thirty-nine, and as bursting with desire as Talia so obviously was, with a request to ravish her all night, I actually wondered if I still 'had it', despite my wives, Natalie, and Yuriko being satisfied with my performance.

"STI test?" I asked reluctantly, hating to break the mood, but having no choice.

She pulled a folded sheet of paper from her pocket and handed it to me. I wasn't surprised that it was a numbered report, which did not have her name or address, but did have her birthdate -- February 28, 1981, showing that she was twenty-one. The test was clean, and the blood had been drawn earlier in the week, satisfying all Jessica's conditions. I handed the document back to her, and she put it back in her pocket.

"You've never kissed before?" I asked.

"Never. Well, my parents on the cheek."

That certainly presented opportunities to be 'very bad' such as Tina Hoff's first kiss coming after she'd had sex. The thing was, I liked kissing during sex, so kissing after the first blowjob would be my choice.

"I want your first kiss to be with my cum in your mouth," I said slyly.

Talia laughed softly, "As you wish!"

I was not at all surprised she used that line from what was my family's favorite movie.

"Take off your clothes, please," I said, sitting down on the love seat.

"The mask stays on," she said.

Which would be interesting in the shower in the morning, but I'd leave that to her."

I nodded, "I assumed."

How she handled undressing would give me a very good idea of her mindset and give me clues about how to proceed. I watched intently as Talia slipped off her shoes, then carefully pulled her fuzzy purple sweater over her head, ensuring she didn't disturb her mask. She tossed the sweater onto the loveseat next to me, then without any hesitation, began unbuttoning her white blouse, which joined the sweater, and revealed a white cotton bra and a flat, toned stomach.

Talia continued her deliberately slow undressing by unbuttoning and unzipping her jeans, then pushing them down revealing matching white cotton panties. Her jeans landed on the small pile of clothing, and her ankle socks quickly joined the growing pile. Talia smiled and looked intently into my eyes as she pushed her bra straps from her shoulders, then reached around and unhooked her bra. She let it fall to the crooks of her arms, then slipped it off and tossed on top of the growing pile of clothing.

Talia's breasts were perfectly round, perfectly firm, and perfectly sized, and I couldn't wait to get my mouth on them. Well, I could, and would, because I had other plans before I worshiped some of the most perfect breasts in the world. My attention was drawn away from them as Talia quickly slipped off her panties and tossed them onto the clothing pile, revealing neatly trimmed pubic hair and full, plump labia, already glistening with her juices.

She hadn't shown any sign of shyness, nervousness, or hesitation, which made it clear she had come not only prepared and determined, but ready to have her request fulfilled. I made a point of obviously looking up and down to take in her beauty, and Talia surprised me by doing a slow turn so I could see her firm butt cheeks and her completely toned legs. When she completed the turn, she simply looked directly into my eyes and waited.

I considered what I wanted to do next, then stood up.

"Undress me."

Talia smiled, nodded, and came over to me. She took off my white fedora and set it on the desk, then helped me out of my double-breasted suit coat and carefully hung it on the back of the desk chair. Next, she removed my tie and draped it over the suit coat. Talia unbuttoned the cuffs on my dress shirt, then unbuttoned the shirt, and helped me out of it, tossing it on top of her clothes. She smiled, then unbuckled my belt, carefully pulled it through the loops and added it to the pile.

"Sit," she requested.

I did and Talia knelt down and untied my wingtips, removed them, and put them side by side under the desk chair. She had me stand, then after a bit of searching, found both the exterior and interior buttons on my slacks, unzipped them, and

pushed them down. She knelt, and I stepped out of them, after which she carefully draped them over the tie and coat, then turned and knelt in front of me.

She looked intently at the bulge in my boxer-briefs, slipped her fingers inside, and carefully pulled them forward to release my erection, then drew them down and helped me step out of them. Talia stood up and tossed them onto the love seat to complete the pile of clothing. She stood, looking intently at me once again, clearly waiting for my next instruction.

I had my own small surprise to spring, so I used a small hook on a stick to remove the tapestry that covered the mirror over the bed. Talia's eyes went wide, but she didn't say anything, so I moved back to stand in front of her.

"I'd like you to give me a blowjob, let me cum in your mouth, and then share your first French kiss."

Talia nodded, and I sat down on the love seat, spreading my legs so she could kneel between them. Once again, she showed no signs of nervousness or hesitation, lightly grasping my shaft in her right hand. Someone had clearly given guidance, or she'd done research, because she began gently stroking me as she ran her tongue along my shaft and around my glans. I watched in anticipation and rapt attention for the next few minutes as her soft tongue bathed my dick.

After what seemed both like an eternity and no time at all, Talia looked up, smiled at me, then parted her lips and took the head of my dick into her mouth. She continued stroking me gently as she sucked softly and ran her tongue around my glans, causing me to groan. Ever so slowly, and nearly imperceptibly, she began taking me further into her mouth, taking nearly two minutes to get me halfway in, all the while stroking, sucking, and sliding her tongue along my shaft.

While I hated the idea of comparing, she was giving one of the best first blowjobs I'd ever been fortunate to receive, and would give even the best, most experienced girls a run for their money. As I watched, she began slowly moving back, leaving my exposed shaft slick with her saliva, until just my glans was in her mouth. As she had before, she sucked and swirled her tongue, then began taking me further into her mouth once more.

The slow, sexy blowjob from a virgin was intensely pleasurable, and I didn't want it to end, though if it didn't, I wouldn't be able to fulfill her other requests, something I very much wanted to do. The second time, she continued until the tip of my dick touched the back of her mouth, then slowly backed off until, once again, only my glans was in her mouth.

Having tested how deep she could take me, she began bobbing slightly faster, using her hand as a limit, so she didn't gag. She continued, and after a few minutes, I felt the first twinges of impending release. A minute later, I twitched, the sign that it was imminent, and I decided to warn Talia of the impending release.

"Soon," I whispered.

Again, without any prompting, she did exactly the right thing, backing off until just my glans was in her mouth, stroking me with her right hand and gently squeezing my sack with her left hand. She stroked faster, swirled her tongue, sucked hard, and about fifteen seconds later she was rewarded when I groaned and the first jet of my cum shot into her mouth. Talia responded by stroking faster and lashing me with her tongue, increasing the pleasure, and accepting spurt after spurt of my cum into her soft mouth.

She didn't stop immediately after the last spurt, continuing to lick, suck, and stroke me, intensifying the pleasure almost to the point of pain. After a minute or so, she released me, climbed into my lap, and offered her lips for a kiss. I pressed

my lips against hers, which parted, and my tongue sought hers, finding, as I'd expected, her mouth full of my cum.

We shared, both swallowing, before she broke the kiss, climbed from my lap, knelt down and bathed my dick with her tongue, then once again taking me in as far as she could, before releasing me. She moved back to my lap, and we exchanged another deep French kiss. This time, I moved my hand to Talia's breast, cupped it, then gently tweaked her nipple. She moaned softly into my mouth and the kiss turned fierce.

I broke the kiss and helped Talia from my lap, then stood up. I pulled the duvet on the bed down and nodded to indicate I wanted Talia to lie down, which she did. Given I'd need ten to fifteen minutes to recover, I had plenty of time to worship her body with my tongue, and I proceeded to do just that, beginning with her small, beautiful breasts. I kissed, licked, and sucked each nipple for several minutes before slowly kissing my way down her body.

When I came to her mons, I nuzzled my nose in her soft, black pubic hair and inhaled deeply of her musky scent. I lavished kisses on the insides of Talia's thighs, then planted five kisses along her labia, getting just the slightest taste of what I'd soon imbibe deeply. I began by slowly running my tongue along her engorged labia, then gently pressing it between them, gaining my first full taste of her succulent juices.

Talia moaned softly as I pressed my tongue deeper into her and swirled it, then flicked her clit with the tip of my tongue. I closed my mouth around her pussy and sucked gently as I pleased her with my tongue. Talia flexed her hips, and less than a minute later, squeezed my head with her thighs, then groaned deeply. I didn't yet feel the stirrings of an erection, so I continued orally pleasuring Talia until she had a second orgasm. After it had run its course, I moved up and French kissed her, giving her a taste of her own essence.

"Do you know what sixty-nine is?" I asked.

Talia smiled, "I did my research!"

"I'd like to hear as much of the story as you're willing to tell."

"Tomorrow," Talia said with a smile.

"OK. Sixty-nine until I'm hard."

I helped Talia move into position, straddling my face and facing my feet, and pulled her pussy to my mouth as she began licking my glans. The combination of time, her taste, and the attention of her tongue had me hard less than two minutes later. I helped her off me, then sat cross-legged on the bed. I got the tube of lube from the drawer and took Talia's hand. I squirted lube into her palm and then moved her hand to my shaft. She quickly got the idea and spread the lube on my dick until it was coated with the slick gel.

I had contemplated how to approach the first time and decided that if I was going to ravish her later, the first time should be slow and gentle, and that my new favorite position was best. I helped Talia into my lap and had her put her legs around me.

"Hold me straight up."

Talia grasped my shaft and held me upright. I put my hands under her, cupped her butt cheeks, and lifted her up. Together, we positioned her with my glans, touching her labia. I kissed her softly and as our tongues touched, I slowly lowered her onto my dick. Talia moaned as my glans passed her labia, and again as she slid down my slick pole, taking me completely inside her very tight, silky tunnel, aided by natural and artificial lube. I used my hands to encourage Talia to move, and she began rocking her hips.

I broke the kiss, said, "Move however feels good," then began kissing again.

Talia began moving, mostly back and forth, but occasionally she lifted up until just my glans was inside her, then sank back down. It didn't take too long before Talia brought herself off, groaning into my mouth as our tongues tangled and her pussy spasmed around my shaft, squeezing it tightly a dozen times before her orgasm passed.

She gave herself two more orgasms before I maneuvered her onto her back without withdrawing. As soon as we were in the missionary position, I started fucking Talia with hard, fast strokes, trying to drive her through the mattress. Talia broke the kiss, gasping and groaning, wrapped her arms and legs around me and began moving her hips with wild abandon. We fucked hard for nearly ten minutes before I slammed into her a final time, groaned loudly, and pumped cum deep inside her, which triggered another orgasm for Talia, who ground against me until both our orgasms had passed.

I kissed Talia deeply, then slid down between her legs and pleased her until I felt I could have my next erection and we switched to sixty-nine. When I was hard, I helped Talia off me, and encouraged her to turn on her stomach. I gently spread her legs, applied copious amounts of lube to my shaft and glans, and between her butt cheeks, then leaned forward.

"Relax," I whispered.

Talia nodded slightly, I positioned the head of my dick against her rear entrance, and when I felt less tension, pushed into her. Talia groaned loudly, I pulled back a bit and pushed forward firmly, needing five short strokes to bury myself in her butt. I gave her a minute to get used to me, then began fucking her ass with long, slow strokes. Talia groaned deeply each time I bottomed out, and after about a dozen strokes, she began tensing her muscles, providing extreme pressure. I

didn't try to hold back, and about seven minutes after I'd entered her, I pushed all the way in, groaned, and filled her rear with my cum.

"We need to wash," I said after I pulled out.

I helped a slightly unsteady Talia from the bed and led her to the bathroom, where I used soap and a washcloth to thoroughly clean myself, then Talia, before leading her back to the bedroom.

"Let's rest for fifteen minutes," I said, pulling Talia into a cuddling position.

It would have been a perfect time to talk, but she'd said in the morning, so I simply lay quietly with her for a quarter hour. When the rest period ended, I had decided on a course of action.

"Sixty-nine until you have an orgasm, fuck with you riding me until you have an orgasm, sixty-nine until you have an orgasm, fuck again until you have an orgasm, then sixty-nine until I have an orgasm. And conclude with me inside you and a French kiss."

Nearly thirty minutes later, I slipped my still hard dick into Talia and pressed my tongue into her mouth to find that she had, once again, not swallowed. We exchanged a fierce French kiss as I ground against her, managing to bring her off before I softened. Given the limits to my performance, I decided on the next course of action -- a bubble bath -- where Talia leaned against me as I tweaked her nipples and pressed a finger into her, applying pressure with my palm giving her several more orgasms before the water cooled and we got out of the tub.

Talia's request for 'all night' was likely to run into physiological limits, and I'd be able to have one, or perhaps two, more erections before needing sleep to recover. While we'd been in the tub, I'd come up with a proposed solution.

"There are limits, even for 'the best'," I said as we stood next to the bed. "You pick what we do now, we sleep for a few hours, and then I'll fuck you, slowly and deliberately, for as long as I possibly can. What would you like to do right now?"

"Lick me, fuck me as hard as you possibly can, then lick me more."

"Your wish is my command!"

When we finished the round, we were both sweaty and sticky, and I was basically spent. I set the alarm, turned off the light, and pulled Talia to me to cuddle so we could sleep for about two hours so we could finish before I had to be available to walk Jessica to the hospital.



November 2, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Did that live up to my billing?" I asked Talia as we got out of bed after fucking for over thirty minutes.

"You certainly turned me into a bad girl, which is exactly what I wanted."

"And the story?" I said, purposefully mumbling.

"Please?" Talia said, confirming my suspicion that she was from somewhere in southwestern Ohio.

"You were going to tell me the story," I said as I turned on the shower. "Or as much as you could. May I make a guess?"

"Go for it!" Talia replied.

"You attended a fundamentalist, evangelical church growing up and were completely sheltered, and your dad wanted you to go to a Bible college to get your M-R-S degree."

"Yes."

"Did you go to Bible college?"

"Yes."

I chuckled, "Twenty questions?"

"It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"It does. Trinity or Moody?"

"Trinity."

"And there was some specific event that led you to want to rebel and you discussed it with someone who knew my reputation and suggested that if you wanted to be a bad girl, I was your man, so to speak."

"Yes."

"Now I'm getting into pure speculation, but your dad, your pastor, or more likely both, basically chose a husband for you, and you didn't appreciate their choice, so you decided to ensure that young man would not be interested once you told him how bad you were."

Talia laughed, "Mind reader?"

"Experience! Do I get to see your face, or will this be forever anonymous?"

"I suppose you could remove the mask," she said.

I did and looked intently into her brown eyes and realized she bore a resemblance to someone I knew, and if THAT was right, it was delicious.

"You're Elizabeth Saddler," I said with a grin.

She laughed, "Vickie said you might guess! She also thought you might refuse if you knew who I was because of my her and Tabitha Larson."

"Possibly, but I wouldn't have rejected it out of hand. By the way, you gave me a serious clue when you said 'Please?' when you didn't hear what I said."

"Oops!" Talia/Elizabeth giggled.

"Vickie or Tabitha?" I asked as I lathered soap onto her svelte body.

"Both. When I was home over the summer, I spoke to Vickie about what my dad wanted and about being a 'fallen' woman, at least as my dad would put it. She suggested I speak with Tabitha, who I didn't know was in Chicago. She was the one who suggested that if I truly wanted to be a bad girl, you were the only choice, and that you would provide 'raw, animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging, multi-orgasmic fucking'. She was right about that!"

"I might have been a bit blunt with her."

"But that was exactly what she wanted and needed, just as I did."

"Now what?" I asked.

"When I go home at Thanksgiving, I'm going to tell Charlie what I've done, in detail. He's the youth pastor at my dad's church and is the one my dad basically ordered me to marry. Now, he not only won't, but couldn't if he wanted to, because I'll make sure it gets out how bad I am!"

Which would likely give Tim Saddler a heart attack or stroke, but it was an absolutely delicious rebuke to him that I'd deflowered both of his daughters AND one of his parishioners.

"I assume this was a one-time thing?"

"It was seven!" Talia exclaimed.

I laughed, "Yes, but one encounter?"

"That was my plan, yes. In fact, my plan was to stay completely anonymous, but when you asked, I decided to let you in on the secret. I think it's probably best we don't see each other again, not because of you, but because of me."

I nodded, "I went into it last night assuming not only would I not see you again, but might never know who you were. I totally understand your point, and as much as I enjoyed what we did, and as fantastic as you were in bed, I don't disagree with your decision to do it, and to not do it again. Out of curiosity, what research?"

"A book, *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* which had literally everything I needed to know! And, of course, Vickie and Tabitha answered my questions, and they both made it clear I had to have an STI test despite being a virgin. I have a question for you."

"What's that?" I asked, as she moved to rinse the suds from her body.

"If I had a friend who wanted the same kind of treatment, would you be willing to do it?"

I would, but I also didn't want to get back into the mode where girls continually brought me other girls.

"I'll certainly consider it," I replied. "Do you have a friend like that?"

"I might after I tell her what happened last night!" Talia/Elizabeth declared as she began soaping my body. "She's not quite in the same situation in that she's not a PK, but she has ridiculously controlling parents who basically manage every second of her life. She made the comment that she wanted to do something 'radical' to prove she was free."

Which reminded me of how Kara had been when I'd first met her -- a torrid affair with the school stud would have been her personal Declaration of Independence. That was exactly what it had been for Sandy, Ruth, Vickie, and Tabitha as well. Becka was different, in that she hadn't had controlling parents. For her, it was a way of casting off shackles she'd donned willingly, rather than had put on her by others.

"If her parents are that controlling, why let her attend college?"

"To learn to be a good Christian wife and be able to teach Sunday school, of course. They picked her husband when she was five or six and he was ten. It's nuts compared to my dad, who at least waited until we were teenagers! She's forbidden from even talking to guys without another girl present."

"That sounds similar to some of my Muslim friends," I said.

"Her church could give the Taliban lessons in oppression! And that's coming from me who went to a conservative Baptist church!"

"I take it you know the story about Doctor Mike Loucks and your dad?"

"Who doesn't?! Dad has never, ever lived that down. Doctor Mike is totally cool, though my dad hates his guts. Did you know my dad tried to prevent him from being hired at Rutherford Regional Hospital?"

"No, but that doesn't surprise me at all. Doctor Mike and Sheriff Emmy basically agree on everything."

"Sheriff Emmy is cool, but Dad has done everything he can to get rid of her ever since you and Vickie had sex."

Talia/Elizabeth finished soaping me and I rinsed off the suds, then shut off the shower. We dried off, then went back to the bedroom to dress.

"I need to walk Jess to work," I said. "I'll be back in about thirty minutes. You're free to go to the kitchen. Yuriko will get you coffee or tea, and then you can have breakfast with us. How are you getting back to school?"

"Tabitha and John will take me back to Deerfield. I just need to meet them at Starbucks at 9:00am."

We finished dressing, exchanged a soft French kiss, and went into the kitchen, where Jessica was finishing her breakfast.

"Morning, Tiger! I see your friend took off her mask."

"Doctor Jessica Adams, meet Elizabeth Saddler from Rutherford, Ohio. Elizabeth, my wife Doctor Jessica."

"NO WAY!" Jessica exclaimed, laughing. "Oh my God!"

"Yeah," I chuckled. "I deflowered BOTH of the 'good' reverend's daughters!"

"NO WAY!" Kara exclaimed, having walked into the kitchen just as I'd said that.

"Kara Adams, please meet Elizabeth Saddler. Elizabeth, my wife Kara, who is a professor at UofC. And just behind her is my wife Suzanne Adams, pre-law at UofC. And the lovely Japanese girl here is my girlfriend Fujimori Yuriko."

"I knew all that before, but I still don't believe it!" Talia/Elizabeth declared. "Hi!"

They all greeted her, Jess downed the last of her tea, and then she, Kara, Suzanne, and I headed for the hospital, leaving Talia/Elizabeth in Yuriko's care.

"That's crazy, Tiger!" Jessica declared. "She came here from Ohio?"

"No, she's at Trinity in Deerfield. She decided she wanted to break free of her father's grasp in the same way her older sister and Tabitha did."

"I've said it before, but I'll say it again," Suzanne opined, "*The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers.*"

"That's absolutely true," Kara declared. "Sandy, Ruth, Vickie, Tabitha, and now Talia, well, Elizabeth, I guess. I take it she got everything she bargained for?"

"Around the world, then hours and hours of being ravished by 'the best!'"

"Seriously, Tiger? Her first time?"

"She *demanded* it, Babe! I kid you not! Tabitha actually told her the phrase I'd used -- 'raw, animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging, multi-orgasmic fucking'."

"Jess, that was what I wanted and received!" Suzanne said. "So why not?"

Jessica laughed, "True. Tiger, When did you know who she was?"

"For sure? In the shower this morning when she took off her mask. But before that she'd used 'Please?' when she hadn't heard me, which gave me a clue as to where she was from and narrowed down the possibilities. I wasn't a hundred percent sure, but I was almost certain she was from Tim Saddler's church and that Vickie, Tabitha, or someone close to them had sent her to me. When she took off the mask, I knew right away because I saw the resemblance."

"He's going to have a stroke if he finds out!" Kara exclaimed.

"I'm pretty sure she intends to tell him," I replied. "But she's twenty-one, so he can lose his shit all he wants and it won't mean a damned thing. Maybe, just maybe, he'll learn a lesson."

"I doubt it," Kara replied. "Kent van der Meer certainly didn't. Are you going to see her again?"

"No, by her choice. She'd originally intended it to be completely anonymous, mainly because she thought I might say 'no' because of what happened with Tabitha and Vickie. This morning, she decided it was OK to reveal her identity, but said she wants to stick to her original plan of just the one time, which I totally get."

"It's NEVER just one time!" Suzanne exclaimed.

I laughed, "She said the same thing! One encounter! That said, she said she has a friend who might need the same jailbreak."

"Which is why I wanted the school stud to fuck my brains out every day for a few weeks, and then I'd move on."

"And how did that work out for you?" I teased.

"I have two wonderful wives and four very annoying children!"

I laughed, "Now what?"

"Just them being themselves," Kara replied. "YOU think they're annoying!"

"Yes, but that's a *good* thing because it shows they're their own persons and feel comfortable giving their old man a hard time!"

"And Birgit *still* wishes you'd give *her* a 'hard' time!" Suzanne said.

"She does, and she doesn't," I replied. "She teased me about it, but it's different now. In fact, if she had her current attitude last year, the conversation we had about her might have been very different. That said, the outcome would likely have been the same."

"You would have?" Jessica said.

"I said the conversation would have been different because what Birgit wanted would have been different. That doesn't mean it would have happened, mostly because of what happened with my sister. That said, they both suffered from the same exact impossible fantasy, which, in the end, was the best reason not to do it, ignoring all the other concerns."

"As open as she was about what she wanted, you need the ability to truthfully say it never happened," Jessica declared. "That, in and of itself, was a risk none of us could take, no matter what other considerations there were."

"Well, it's in the past now," I said. "And Birgit is keeping busy with several boy toys!"

"And girl toys!" Suzanne declared. "Miss Birgit is in full experimental mode."

"She's going to maximize her fun right up until the second she gets married," I said. "And then she'll have to be a bit more restrained."

"Melanie?" Kara asked.

"Something like that," I replied.

We reached the hospital and Kara, Suzanne, and I all kissed and hugged Jessica.

"Make sure you take a nap today, Tiger."

"I will," I replied.

She went into the hospital and Kara, Suzanne, and I headed home.

 Birgit

I was frustrated by the situation with Philip, and when I'd seen Peter in Albert's room, I'd decided he'd be a perfect way to work out my frustrations. Now we lay in my bed on Saturday morning, and I'd have to make sure to not give Philip any clue that Peter and I had fooled around until about 3:00am. I'd actually slept past cuddle time, which was out of the ordinary, but I wondered if Dad had actually

been there, given I'd heard that he had disappeared with a girl just before midnight.

"We need to shower and go downstairs for breakfast," I said to Peter.

"You get up WAY too early," he grouched.

"I slept *late* today!" I declared. "I'm usually downstairs just after 6:00am to see my dad when he comes back from walking Mom to the hospital."

"You're crazy!" Peter declared as we climbed out of bed.

"It's the only way to be!" I giggled. "In fact, it would be impossible to be me if I was totally sane!"

"Far be it from me to argue with you, Princess Birgit!"

I giggled, "You got to fuck the princess, so you should have NO complaints."

"None!"

"Good! Would you like a blowjob in the shower from the Princess?"

"Only an idiot would say 'no' to that! Good thing I'm not an idiot!"

"Mostly!" I teased.

I gave him an expert blowjob, swallowing his tasty cum, and we exchanged a deep French kiss before we quickly washed up. Once we finished the shower, we dried, dressed, and went downstairs.

"I see where I rate!" Dad said when he saw us. "You skipped cuddle time!"

"Mom said you were busy with a dalliance!" I retorted.

"May I speak with you for a moment?" Dad asked.

"Peter, just go to the kitchen, OK?"

He did, and I followed Dad to his study, which seemed odd. He sat down in one of the large leather chairs and I sat down in his lap.

"What?" I asked.

"Do you know the phrase 'dance with the one who brung you'?" Dad asked.

I sighed, "You mean Philip, right?"

"Yes. How would he feel seeing you come downstairs with Peter?"

"Bad, I guess. Is he up?"

"I haven't seen him, but it's only 7:00am. You don't have to answer, but what happened?"

"I almost goofed," I said. "I haven't talked to Philip about an STI test and I was this close," I held my thumb and forefinger about a millimeter apart, "to asking him to sleep in my room, but remembered. After he went to bed, I came upstairs, and I was super frustrated because I couldn't have what I wanted. I saw Peter in Albert's room playing video games and asked if he'd rather play with me. He said 'yes'."

Dad laughed, "That young man knows on which side his bread is buttered! But Pumpkin, Philip was your date, and unless you had some kind of understanding, you shouldn't have been with anyone else."

"You go off with girls all the time, Dad! And you're married!"

"And I had express permission from your moms and Suzanne. You know we have an agreement about what is, and what isn't, acceptable."

"Oh, I know!" I groused. "That's why I couldn't get what I wanted!"

"Not the primary reason," Dad replied. "And no, you do not get to know."

I had tried to figure out what it might be, but the people who I thought might know would never tell me, and the people who would tell me anything, including Aunt Penny, didn't know, or so they claimed, and I believed them.

"Will you ever tell me?"

"That is something I can never discuss with you, Pumpkin. If it only involved me, or something that was in the open, I'd discuss it with you, at least in a general way. This isn't, so I can't. That doesn't mean I don't love you or that I don't trust you, just that I can't talk about it because of the other person. I hope you'll understand."

"I do, and I love you, Dad!"

"I love you, too, Pumpkin!"

XLI. A Proposition

November 2, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"What's bugging you?" Ashley asked when I went into the sunroom after both Peter and Philip had left. "Besides no cuddle time this morning?"

"I'm just frustrated," I said.

"Peter not satisfying you?" Ashley teased.

"He's fine."

"Can't get Philip to see past you being fourteen?"

"It's more complicated," I replied. "I think he might never have kissed a girl before he met me."

"Whoa!" Ashley gasped. "He's like twenty!"

"And a total nerd. He likes to play with his sword, and I don't mean euphemistically! I mean, I get that guys like different stuff than girls, but he'd rather play *Dungeons & Dragons* and go to Society for Creative Anachronism meetings than go on dates!"

"He's gone on dates with you!" Ashley protested. "Like almost every Friday!"

"Will you stop interfering with my attempt to have a snit?!"

Ashley laughed, "What's the *real* reason? It's Dad, isn't it? You're still trying to figure out his reason for saying 'no' to you, well, besides your big mouth!"

"Grr!" I growled.

"You need to learn to be less obviously forceful," Ashley said. "You're about as subtle as a nuclear bomb! You'd be amazed at how much you could learn if you stay quiet, watch, and listen!"

"You think you know?" I asked.

Ashley shrugged, "I have a theory, but it's not something I would ever say out loud, even to you."

"Why not?"

"Because it's just a theory, and I have zero proof. May I point out that you also say stuff without considering if it's profitable to say it?"

"You're a pain in the butt!" I groused.

"And also correct!" Ashley declared.

"What-ever!" I huffed and walked away, heading to my room.

I sat down, unsure of what I wanted to do, so I opened my diary and began writing.

 Steve

"Would you like me to walk you to Starbucks?" I asked Talia/Elizabeth when we finished breakfast.

"No, it's better to not be seen together," she replied. "It's early, but I think I'll head there now."

I nodded and walked her to the door.

"Good girl entered; bad girl leaves!" Talia/Elizabeth said.

"Allow me to extend an offer to visit at any time. I realize you don't intend to, but you never know how life will turn out."

"Thanks. If you hear from a girl who identifies herself as Blanchette, that's my friend."

I laughed, knowing the reference to *Little Red Riding Hood*.

"And I'm the wolf?" I asked.

"Being 'eaten' by you was NOT a bad thing!" Talia/Elizabeth declared.

"I enjoyed it as well! I'm curious about what you'll do when you graduate."

"Early childhood education -- pre-school. It doesn't require a teaching certificate. Once I have a job, I'll work on the requirements for a teaching certificate."

"Good luck with your visit home."

"Thanks."

She left, and as soon as she reached the sidewalk, I closed the door and went to my study. I'd just sat down when the phone rang with a 614 area code, but Caller ID didn't show a name, but that often happened with numbers between the Baby Bells. It was impossible for anyone in Ohio to know what had just happened, as Talia/Elizabeth couldn't have even made it to Starbucks in the time it had taken the phone to ring after she left. I picked up the handset.

"Steve Adams."

"Paul Reynolds."

"Hi, Paul! Good news?"

"I have the final occupancy permit for the new units in my hands. We're still waiting on some pieces of furniture and furnishings, but we'll have them by mid-December in time for our first rentals on January 1st."

"That's great! And renovating the original building?"

"Still on track to start February 1st with a completion date of April 30th. Thanks for the tip on the completion bonus."

"You're welcome. That worked really well when my house was renovated before we moved in."

"I'd like you to be our first guest in the suite in the new building. Sheriff Emmy, Doctor Mike, and Lou would all like to see you. Any chance you're free the first full weekend in December?"

I checked my calendar, and it was free. Of course, I wasn't sure I wanted to visit Rutherford any time soon, but I did have business with Paul and Liz, and with Lou, so it would have to happen, eventually.

"I could probably swing that," I replied.

"Bring as many of your clan as you want! There's plenty of room. Just let me know."

"Let me speak with them. Jess normally has Saturday and Sunday shifts, but I'm sure she'd love to visit with Doctor Mike. They usually only see each other at medical conferences."

"Vickie Northrup said to say 'hi' as well and said you should let her know if you'll be in town."

"You can let everyone know once I discuss it with the family. See if Lou will book his dining room for everyone you mentioned; families, too, including kids, if that works."

"I'll give Lou a call and see if we can swing that Saturday evening. I know he'll move the earth for you."

"Thanks, Paul. I'll call in the next few days."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, then fired up my computer to make an entry in my journal. Once that was done, I read UseNet news, then just before 10:00am, Natalie, Yuriko, and I left for the ice rink to watch Jesse's game against Saint Patrick Catholic.

 Stephie

"Kara Mom said she's going to bake cookies," Ashley said. "She sent me to ask if you want to help."

"Yes," I agreed.

I got up and followed my sister out of our room.

"Are you going to get back together with Nicholas?" Ashley asked.

"He's more interested in video games than he is in me!" I declared.

"For now! At some point the testosterone will kick in and he'll be interested in girls. The last thing you want is him to be interested in someone else!"

"Like I care!"

"You will!"

"Just drop it, OK?" I asked.

"Sure," Ashley agreed.

We went into the kitchen where Mom was getting things from cupboards so we could make cookies.

"I want to make almond cookies for Dad," Ashley said.

"I assumed," Mom said. "Stephie, do you want to make chocolate chip or sugar cookies?"

"Do we have M&Ms?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then sugar cookies with M&Ms."

"Did you girls have fun at the party?" Mom asked.

"Yes!" Ashley exclaimed.

"It was boring," I said. "My friends and I ended up hanging out in Amber's room and playing games."

"If you didn't hate boys, you'd have WAY more fun!" Ashley said.

"Ashley," Mom said. "Let's not fight, please. Let's just bake cookies."

"Sorry, Kara Mom."

"Can anyone help?" Suzanne asked, coming into the kitchen.

"You can help me," Ashley said. "I'm baking almond cookies for Dad!"

"I'm baking almond cookies for Dad," I said, mocking my sister.

"Stephie!" Mom exclaimed. "What did I just say?"

"Sorry, Mom."

All of them thought Dad walked on water and could do no wrong, but I didn't believe that. He was a good dad, but he wasn't perfect, and it really annoyed me that basically every girl who came to the house wanted to have sex with him. Why couldn't he be satisfied with THREE wives?

But they all thought it was OK, and worse, Mom actually encouraged it! It was almost as if she liked it! None of that made sense to me, but there wasn't anything I could do about it because everyone else was fine with it. Birgit was

the worst, though, because she approved of it, encouraged him, and, disgustingly, wanted to sleep with him herself!

"The M&Ms are in the pantry," Mom said.

"OK," I replied, and went to get them.

 Jesse

"Coach, can I make an announcement?" I asked when I walked into the locker room.

"About what?" he asked.

"A party with the girls' softball team at my house two weeks from today. Luna Alonso's dad will be there, along with my dad, and he asked me to invite you. Luna will invite the softball coach."

Coach laughed, "I'm not sure four chaperones are enough! But I'll be there to help keep you men out of trouble."

"Good luck with that, Coach!" Goalie Coach Mitchell exclaimed.

"Get me the details, Jesse. And get dressed."

"Yes, Coach!"

I sat down next to Pete and began dressing. Once everyone was in the locker room, Coach pointed to me and I stood up.

"Two weeks from today, the 16th, Luna Alonso and I are hosting a party for our team and the girls' softball team at my Dad's house," I said. "Just the teams, and

my dad, Luna's dad, Coach Nelson, and Ms. Jefferson, the softball coach, will chaperone."

The guys all cheered, and I sat down to finish dressing while Coach gave our usual pep talk and reminded everyone to stay in their lanes and cover their men. Saint Patrick was one of the worst teams in the league, but that didn't mean we could let up or lose focus. When Coach finished, we filed out of the locker room, past the bench, and onto the ice for our warmups.

The game was a complete mismatch, and I only needed to make seven saves while we scored five goals, with Nicholas scoring twice. We were still undefeated, and with four games to go before Christmas break, we were on track to win our league.

"That was pretty easy," Mom One said when I met her and Mom Two after the game.

"I was getting bored," I said. "I averaged about two saves per period."

"What are you doing this afternoon?" Libby asked.

"Brooke is coming over so we can do math homework."

"Right," Libby smirked. "There will be plenty of integration, but not the kind you can do in class!"

"We're actually doing math homework!"

"But not only math homework!"

"No comment," I replied with a smug smile.

I left the rink with my moms so we could get home and I could have lunch before Brooke arrived.



November 3, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"What's the topic for today?" Jackson asked as he, Holly, Suzanne, Natalie, and I relaxed in the sauna before Philosophy Club.

"I was considering the proposition that marriage is the most expensive way there is to have sex for free!"

All the others laughed.

"Doubly so if you have kids!" Suzanne declared.

"So the *real* topic?" Jackson asked, shaking his head.

"The proposition that if you need permission to exercise a right, it's no longer a right."

"Gun permits?" Natalie asked.

"That's one example," I replied. "And the intent is to actually discuss the idea that citizens have the right to earn a living with minimal, if any, government interference."

"That ought to set the progressives' heads spinning!" Suzanne declared.

"Except they actually agree," I countered. "The entire concept of a 'living wage' and unionization are specifically in defense of that idea, even if they aren't acknowledged by proponents in the same way philosophically."

"I always forget you actually support unionization," Holly said.

"What I object to is the government putting their thumb on the scale," I replied. "Unions are the proper response to the abusive type of capitalism I reject out of hand, but unions can be abusive of both their members and of capital. And public employees unions are abusive of taxpayers, especially in states like Illinois where there is constant self-dealing between the Combine and the public sector unions."

"You mean political donations from unions to the politicians who approve their salary and benefits package, right?" Natalie asked.

"Yes. If that were done in the private sector, it would be called bribery or illegal kickbacks and prosecuted without mercy. The same is true of actual insider trading by Members of Congress who are expressly exempt from insider trading statutes. There's a reason why investments by Congresscritters consistently outperform the market -- they can trade on knowledge of backroom deals and classified information."

"Congress LOVES to exempt themselves from laws that apply to everyone else," Natalie said. "That was discussed in a poli-sci course I had last semester."

"How would you handle it, Steve?" Jackson asked. "I mean combatting insider trading in Congress?"

"Blind trusts with the trustees appointed by the governor of the Senator's or Representative's home state. And the penalty for trying to influence the trustee or

feed them information is automatic expulsion from the House or Senate and disqualification from future office."

"Harsh!" Jackson declared. "But could they do that?"

"Yes. According to the Constitution, each body is the sole judge of the qualifications of their members and of their election returns. The House and Senate could refuse to seat anyone who had violated that rule, and it's perfectly Constitutional, even if the candidate won re-election. There was, in fact, a case where state election officials and the courts ruled that the Republican had won an election based on the election laws, but the House Democrats seated the Democrat. There was literally nothing that anyone could do about that because the courts have no jurisdiction."

"When did that happen?" Jackson inquired.

"In 1985, Richard D. McIntyre, a Republican, beat Frank McCloskey, a Democrat, by just over 400 votes in Indiana's 8th Congressional district. The House leadership ignored the state certification and performed their own partisan recount by their own standards, not those enshrined in Indiana law. There was literally nothing anyone could do, including the courts, which had to dismiss the case based on the Constitution. It was a raw abuse of power by Democrats."

"Shades of Al Gore," he said. "It seems to me Democrats have no legitimate right to complain about the 2000 election, given that happened."

"Everybody has a right to complain, especially about George Bush!" I chuckled. "But karma is a real bitch!"

"Going back to what you said about insider trading," Suzanne opined, "Nobody should go to DC to get rich."

"The revolving door with lobbyists and defense contractors has to be stopped as well," Natalie declared. "Not to mention the book deals that smell suspiciously like payoffs. When Senator Bedfellow gets a larger advance on their book than Tom Clancy or J. K. Rowling, you KNOW the game is rigged!"

"One of my professors quipped that next time, we should fight for representation without taxation!" Suzanne declared.

"He's not wrong!" I replied. "The 16th Amendment provided DC with, in effect, unlimited funds, and the 17th Amendment eliminated any control by the states because it turned Senate elections into popularity contests, which is the exact *opposite* of what was intended."

"You're fanatical on that topic!" Jackson said.

Natalie smirked, "A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject. That's Steve!"

"You know, I can get this kind of abuse for Birgit and Jesse!" I declared. "I don't need to invite my so-called Inner Circle into my sauna!"

"You love all of us!" Suzanne declared. "Not because we don't abuse you, but because we do!"

"You might have a point," I chuckled.

 Birgit

"You're getting better!" I said to Bob after our second round.

"I could go home and call Meghan," Bob retorted.

"Speaking of which..."

"All I will say at this point is that she won't join us next Sunday. Anything else has to be between her and me."

I frowned, though Bob couldn't see because my head was on his chest. I knew I wasn't entitled to that information, but I thought he should tell me, especially if he was going to invite her to be with us. Lilibeth and I shared basically everything, and the same was true of Tiffany. But I didn't want to fight with Bob, so I'd let it go.

"OK," I said, doing my best not to sound displeased. "I shouldn't have asked."

"Would you answer if I asked who you've had sex with?"

"Maybe," I replied. "There are two girls I basically share everything with. Kind of like you and Meghan. If you and I agreed to share everything, I would."

"What about privacy? I'm not saying you did anything wrong, mind you, because we did talk about it."

"I think if you had said 'tell nobody', that would be different," I said. "But there weren't any conditions, and we agreed we could tell our confidantes. It's not like I was telling the entire world."

"Besides what we've done, what else have you done?" Bob asked.

I giggled, "Wouldn't YOU like to know?!"

"Obviously, or I wouldn't have asked!"

"Anal, tit-fuck, and 'food play', which was chocolate sauce."

"Did you like it? I mean anal?"

"It was really weird," I replied. "It's something I'd let a special guy do on occasion, if he really wanted to do it. Is that something you want to do?"

"Er, I haven't really thought about it, so I don't know. The other stuff? Sure. Where did the guy cum for the tit-fuck?"

"On my face! It was pretty cool! Of course, you have to kiss me afterwards! Even if it's on my lips!"

Bob laughed, "You kissed me with a mouthful of my cum, so it's not like that's new!"

"Would you cum on my boobs and face and lick it all off?" I asked, running a finger along his stick, flaccid shaft.

"Seriously? You'd want me to do that?"

"Not adventurous and open-minded enough to do it?" I teased, cupping his balls.

"I'm trying to think of an equivalent, but you've already eaten pussy and promised to do it with Meghan if she's interested!"

"I'll try almost anything once," I replied. "Well, not scat or 'water sports'. You know what those are, right?"

"Totally gross!" Bob declared. "They were mentioned in the book, and I just shook my head. I guess it takes all kinds! Do you have toys?"

"A vibrator, and I'll use it on you if you let me!"

"You're dangerous!" Bob declared.

"I want to actually get a dildo and a harness. I think you can guess why."

"Not for Meghan, right?" Bob asked.

I gently licked his glans, "I mean, sure, I could, but you know *exactly* where I'd put it!"

"I was wrong. You aren't dangerous, you're frightening!"

"If my answers frighten you, then you should cease asking scary questions!" I giggled, quoting Jules from *Pulp Fiction*, then took his glans into my mouth and sucked hard while running my tongue all over it.

Bob groaned in response and I cupped his balls, squeezed, and slowly took him completely into my mouth, something I could do when he was soft. Bob got hard quickly, and I had a decision to make. We'd already fucked twice, so I moved on top of him, put my pussy on his mouth and as soon as I felt his tongue moving, I began bobbing my head up and down, stroking with one hand and gently squeezing his balls with the other.

Bob had great stamina, especially after one or two rounds, and he gave me two really good orgasms before I felt him pulse. I sucked hard and ran my tongue around the head of his dick while pumping him with my hand. I loved the feel of him spurting into my mouth, and sucked until I had every drop of his cum, then released him, turned, impaled myself on him, and French kissed him, allowing most of his cum to drain into his mouth. I ground against him as we kissed, bringing myself off for a third time.

"You just love doing that, don't you?" Bob asked when I finally broke the kiss.

"Yes!" I giggled. "But I like swallowing, too!"

"I suppose after what you just did..."

"A 'snowball'," I said, interrupting him. "That's what it's called."

"Is there *anything* you don't know?" Bob asked.

"I'm sure there is," I giggled, "but I know more than you, which is what counts! What were you going to say?"

"That I'll do all the stuff you asked about! The question is, will you?"

I laughed, "Including the harness and dildo?"

"You don't have those, do you?"

"No, but I could get them. I actually spoke to my aunt, who would get them for me, but she was worried about how a teenage guy would react."

"This teenage boy is both frightened and intrigued!" Bob declared. "Out of curiosity, if I let you do that..."

"You'd absolutely be special enough for that privilege!"

"You've had threesomes, but always two girls and a guy, right?"

"Yes. Always M-F-F. And to answer your next question, YES! I want two guys at once!"

"You, er, wouldn't expect them to do stuff with each other, would you?" Bob asked nervously.

I smirked, "I'd pay good money to see you give a blowjob!"

"NOT HAPPENING!" Bob declared.

"Bummer!" I declared. "But seriously, I want to, if I can find the two right guys. Would you?"

"With some serious restrictions! I obviously wouldn't use my mouth on you after another guy came in you."

"Wimp!" I teased. "But I understand. Guys are touchy about that kind of thing."

"And you aren't at all? You're truly bisexual?"

"Remember, I don't like labels. I'm Birgit, and I do what I want, what feels good, and don't allow anyone to define me. I'm just having fun, and there are plenty of ways to have fun."

"So, with girls, is it the same? I mean, how you feel about it?"

"No. I've been one-on-one with girls, and it's just not the same. The first time was really exciting, but I also realized that I strongly prefer guys. I'll do stuff with girls in a threesome, for sure. I'm not sure if I'll be one-on-one with a girl again. Maybe, if it's the right thing to do and I want to, which are the only valid criteria."

"What's your biggest fantasy?"

There was no way I could tell Bob what it was.

"That is one thing that has to remain completely private," I said. "Sorry."

"It's OK. I told you what happens with Meghan, if anything, is off-limits, so I totally understand. When I showed up today, your mom, er, what do you call Suzanne?"

"Suzanne. She's not my mom."

"But the other two are?"

"Yes. Suzanne doesn't want kids and never wanted to be a mom, so we just call her by her name. Also, my moms were married to my dad when I was born, and Suzanne joined much later."

"She asked about your 'Hangout'. Are you skipping that for this?"

"Honestly, I forgot it was this weekend. We can have lunch and go if you want."

"Three times is sufficient for me, but I wonder about you..."

I laughed, "Never enough! But let's shower, have lunch, then go to Libby's."



November 4, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"Nice tan!" I said as Dante Puccini and I shook hands at Ruth's Chris Steak House on Monday evening.

"Not as good as it was two weeks ago when we left Bali."

"The nightclub bombing?"

"Yeah, we had actually been in Paddy's Irish Pub two days before the bombing and decided it was time to move on."

"Where to?"

"Back to South Africa."

"Still seeing the same girl after a year?" I asked with a grin.

"We got married last Wednesday."

"Got tired of the 'Supermodel of the Month Club'?"

"Jacqueline is pregnant. I felt I should do the right thing."

"You flew to the US for dinner with me?"

"I had to meet with my accountant and tax attorney, and take care of some other business."

"Did your wife come with you?"

"Yes. She's visiting a friend in New York. I'm flying there tomorrow."

"Gentlemen?" the maître d' said. "Your table is ready."

He led us to a table and immediately a waiter came to take our drink orders.

"Can you drink?" Dante asked.

"Yes."

"Two single malts," Dante said. "Macallan, if you have it."

"We have double cask '18' and sherry cask '15'," he replied.

"Sherry cask," Dante requested.

"Very good, sir!" he said, clicking his pen in approval and walking away.

"How is business?" Dante asked.

"Good. The legal side is going gangbusters; the medical side is tougher, with a longer sales cycle, but also more stable so there are lower development costs. The on-site support and consulting gigs are variable, but profitable. The best part is, I spend most of my time coding."

"Your sister and your girlfriend are still running the show for you, right?"

"Yes."

"See, that was something I never had. My brother and sister couldn't think strategically and didn't have the chops for engineering. How are Mark and Melissa doing?"

"Great. Our business relationship is in excellent shape and, from all reports, they're very profitable."

"You have other investments, right? A place out east?"

"A bed-and-breakfast in Vermont," I replied. "Also a motel and a pair of restaurants in Rutherford, Ohio, a prohibition-era-themed hotel in Newport, Kentucky, and a local chain of convenience stores in Los Angeles."

"When do you plan to retire?"

"Never!" I chuckled. "I enjoy coding the way you enjoyed designing electrical circuits for your testing equipment. The difference is, I don't have to run my company because my sister and Elyse handle all the business stuff and I have Cindi and Julia for sales and technology. I spend better than 90% of my time head down in code."

"What about vacations?"

"We were in Sweden and Russia last year," I replied. "In a few years we'll do a long European vacation. Jess wants to get to Australia eventually, so that'll happen at some point."

"You still have your dealings with the Russian firm?"

"Yes. I didn't invest, though; all of Lyudmila's funding came through my Russian friends."

"A member of their parliament and a retired general, right?"

"Yes. And Lyudmila's husband works in the Kremlin and is connected with the right people in the Putin administration which makes life a whole lot easier for Lyudmila."

The waiter brought our drinks and asked if we were ready to order, which we were. The only thing I needed to do special was ask for no croutons on my salad, as I could choose fresh steamed broccoli as my side instead of a potato.

"Still married to the doctor and the professor?" Dante asked after the waiter left.

"And a pre-law student," I replied. "Suzanne is now officially a wife."

"The fact that you've pulled that off is pretty amazing. How are the kids?"

"They're all doing great. Jesse's hockey team is undefeated, Matthew has had starring roles in every drama performance, Birgit is about to test for her black belt and is into photography, Albert is continuing to learn to fly, Michael is involved in robotics competition, and Stephie and Ashley are both about to test for their brown belts."

"I always knew you were insane, and that proves it!"

I chuckled, "I've never denied that! Did you know we hired Amara Chaudhary?"

"Yes. She let me know. Her sister is a solid programmer and someone you should hire if you have a chance."

"She's happy where she is, according to Amara," I replied. "She's leading a development team at Citadel."

"I'm surprised you or Samantha didn't try to poach her, given they're competitors."

"That would be up to Terry Penfield," I replied. "He's running IT for Samantha."

The waiter brought our salads, and we began eating. Most of the meal was taken up with small talk about politics, the bombing in Bali, and his travels. I didn't order dessert, but did order coffee.

"I have a proposition for you," Dante said.

"I'm listening."

"I'm investigating some investments in some tech startups and I need someone I trust to evaluate them. I'll pay you a consulting fee, of course, and in exchange for some oversight by you, a taste of any IPO proceeds."

"Anything that competes with NIKA, M&M, or Spurgeon?"

"Not directly, unless you count any software company as a competitor."

"No, so long as they aren't creating legal or medical software, or working on proprietary trading algorithms.

"No. They're mostly pure web plays, though there is one company that is working on medical testing equipment, but that doesn't compete with M&M or you."

"What kind of equipment?" I asked.

"Real-time blood glucose monitoring."

"Non-invasive?"

"No. That's the Holy Grail, but it's likely decades away. What do you say?"

"It'll be nice to be in business with you again," I replied.

Dante extended his hand across the table and I shook it.

"I'll have my attorney send you a proposed consulting contract tomorrow. Have your lawyer look it over, suggest any changes, and get it back to my attorney as soon as you can."

"I'm surprised you didn't have it with you!"

Dante laughed, "I considered it, but I knew you'd need to run it by your attorney. Sal Marchetti, who's based in New York, will reach out to you tomorrow."

"Sounds good."

We finished our coffee, shook hands again, and I headed home while Dante headed to his hotel.



November 5, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"Steve, I have an attorney named Salvatore Marchetti from New York on the phone for you," Kimmy said over the intercom mid-morning on Tuesday.

"Put him through, please."

She did and after a brief conversation, I asked him to fax the proposal to Liz's private fax number. He promised to do it right away, and as soon as I hung up, I went to Liz's office.

"You're going to receive a fax from a New York number," I said.

"About?" Liz asked.

"At dinner last night Dante asked me to look into some possible tech investments on his behalf. He's offering a consulting fee and a taste of any IPO proceeds. I'd

like you to look over the contract and suggest changes, if any. I don't mind if the table is tilted in Dante's favor so long as the numbers are acceptable."

"You didn't agree on a number?"

"He didn't offer, and I didn't ask. He already had the contract and consulting agreement drawn up, though he didn't have them with him. Let's see what he offers."

Three minutes later, Liz's computer chimed, and she opened the fax which had been delivered into *Outlook* by the TruFax installation we had running. She quickly scanned it and looked up.

"\$12K per year, plus expenses, including First Class air travel, and 2% of any IPO proceeds. The 2% is based on the issue price less his investment cost."

"So basically \$1000 bucks a month to provide oversight," I observed. "That's fine. I have no idea what 2% is worth, because I have no clue what the companies are, and I won't know until I sign the agreement. Give it a once-over and let me know if there are any terms to which I shouldn't agree."

"Give me thirty minutes," Liz said. "The entire agreement is only three pages and at first glance, it looks straightforward."

"Thanks," I said.

"So you and Dante are partners again?"

"I've always been willing to do business with Dante," I said. "It was Dante who chose to make me an enemy. He's reconsidered that now that he's had his attitude adjusted by the 'Supermodel of the Month' club."

Liz laughed softly, "That's rich coming from you! I saw that hot college student you disappeared with on Friday night, not to be seen again!"

"You're seeing me now!" I countered.

Liz rolled her eyes, "You are more pedantic than any lawyer or judge I've ever met!"

"Thank you!"

"That was NOT a compliment!"

"Sez YOU!"

"Go back to your desk!"

"Yes, Mom!" I smirked.

"That's one fantasy I am positive you never had."

"No kidding," I said flatly.

I left her office and returned to mine to get back to the code I was writing. As I sat down, I thought about my deal with Dante, which meant that in addition to the trips to Rutherford and San Francisco, I'd likely need to work in other trips, though, as yet, I had no idea where. That said, some of the companies were likely in the Bay Area and I might be able to kill two birds with one stone, as it were.

For the trip to Rutherford, I had let Paul know that my wives and I would drive out on Friday of the first full week of December and drive back on Monday. Kara's grad student would cover her classes and office hours for her and

Suzanne had spoken to her professors, so the only remaining concern was someone covering for Jessica, which she was trying to arrange.

My mobile phone rang about five minutes later and I saw it was Jess calling.

"Hi, Babe."

"Hi, Tiger! I traded with Allyson Crowley for the weekend we'll be in Ohio."

"What did that cost you?" I asked.

"Four daytime shifts in January, and any reasonable favor she requested."

"She let you off easy!" I chuckled. "Did she name a favor?"

"No, but she did ask if that included borrowing my husband!"

I laughed, "She did say I was cute!"

"It was actually Lucy who said that! I can't believe you forgot a compliment from a redhead!"

"So sue me!" I chuckled. "Was Allyson teasing or was that a serious request?"

"I think she was teasing, but she is single, so you never know!"

"True, but it would break one of our important rules."

"I know, and I told her that. She pouted, but I'm pretty sure it was an act. I'm positive she understands why that would be a bad idea."

"Then we're all set for Ohio."

"Did you hear from Dante?"

"From his attorney. Liz is reviewing the contract but the numbers work. Once I sign, I'll find out where I have to go."

"OK. I need to get back. I was on break from teaching but wanted to let you know what Allyson said."

"Thanks. Love you!"

"Love you, too, Tiger!"

We said 'goodbye' and I snapped the phone shut. About twenty minutes later Liz called me to her office.

"I don't see any red flags or anything that I'd say was improperly tilted towards Dante. You're OK with the fee structure, so I'd say it's OK to sign."

"Thanks. Let me go see Carol and have her notarize my signature and I'll have Kimmy scan the document and fax it back, then put the original in the mail."

Liz handed me the documents, which I read as I walked to Bob's office where I had his assistant, Carol, notarize my signature. I took them to Kimmy, gave her instructions, then went back to my desk.

 Birgit

When I arrived home from school on Tuesday, I went up to my room, put my books away, and changed out of my school clothes into a cute sweatsuit. Peter and Julie would arrive in about thirty minutes, and that gave me enough time to make a phone call.

"Hi, Birgit!" Aunt Elyse said when she answered her phone.

"Hi! Do you have time to talk?"

"Yes. What's up?"

"Do you remember the conversation we had about toys?"

Aunt Elyse laughed, "How could I forget?"

"I had a mature, careful conversation with someone and I'd like you to get me a harness and dildo, please."

"And your potential partner knows what you intend to do with those toys once you get them?"

"Yes."

"I need to clear it with your dad. It would be different if you were older."

"I assumed that would be the case. And if I was older, I wouldn't need YOU to buy them for me!"

"True! I know you've thought about it, but are you *sure* that's what you want to do?"

"Yes. I've already had that done to me, but with the real thing!"

Aunt Elyse laughed, "I am SO not surprised! And you requested it because you were curious, right?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It's something I would do occasionally to make a guy happy, but it's not something I'd do too often."

"And what you're proposing?"

"Only theory, no practice!"

"Assuming your dad approves, which I'm sure he will, you and I will have a very detailed conversation about how to use it. That's a prerequisite and isn't negotiable. You also have to promise you will *never* try to surprise anyone. You have to discuss it before you do it."

"I understand. This has to do with Sean, right?"

"Yes. If you were in college, I'd just give you advice and say 'go for it' but you aren't and your partners are your age, right?"

"Uhm, except one, who was much older."

"Mikael Westberg, right?" Elyse asked.

"No comment," I said, but I giggled and gave it away.

"Given what I heard about your dad and Katt's student, it was a no-brainer to figure that one out, especially given Pete, Terry, and Kurt do not have ANY freedom in that regard."

"My aunts are a pain in my butt! Well, except you!"

"Nice recovery. I'll bring the things you asked for on Sunday afternoon."

"Thanks, Aunt Elyse! I appreciate it!"

"You're welcome!"

I hung up and then sat down to do homework until Peter and Julie arrived.

 Steve

"What did you need?" I asked Elyse when she called me to her office late in the afternoon.

"Your daughter called and requested I buy her the toys she asked for. I made sure she had discussed it with her intended victim, and she said she had."

"For definitions of 'victim' that means 'luckiest teenage boy in Chicago!'" I chuckled. "So long as she discussed in maturely and in advance, I'm OK for you to do what she asked, assuming you're comfortable."

"She actually used the same word -- mature -- to describe the conversation. I put two conditions on her request. The first was you had to approve; the second was that she and I have a detailed conversation about what she's about to do and she has to listen to my advice."

"I appreciate you looking out for her," I said.

"It's too easy to go down that road and not consider the ramifications of what you're doing, especially as a teen."

"I agree, but I'm sure you agree Birgit is different from how you were at thirteen."

"Birgit knew more about sex at six than I did five minutes before Sean took me around the world that first day!"

"Of that I have no doubt."

"I'll get the items this week and bring them to Birgit on Sunday. We'll show up a bit early so she and I can have a private conversation before the family dinner."

"Sounds good," I said.

 Birgit

"WHAT?!" I gasped. "WHY?!"

"Because I like him a lot," Julie said. "And he likes me a lot."

I scowled. Instead of going to bed, Julie and Peter had said they wanted to talk, and they'd told me they were going to start dating exclusively. I was NOT, repeat NOT happy with them, but I also didn't think I could stop it. That didn't mean I couldn't try!

"But we're having fun together!" I protested. "And I know you both liked it! And Julie, I thought you were interested in girls."

"Birgit," Peter said, "you told me it was just for fun between us. I know you're seeing other guys, and Julie and I want both want to be together."

"Fine," I said flatly.

"Birgit," Julie said. "Why are you so upset?"

Because I couldn't have my way, of course! But I couldn't say that, because it would make me sound like a bitch. No, it would actually make me a bitch, and that is NOT what I wanted. I took a deep breath and let it out.

"Sorry," I said. "You just surprised me."

"We're going to my house," Peter said.

"OK," I replied.

I walked them to the front door and once they'd left, I went to find Ashley, who was in the sunroom.

"WHOA!" she gasped. "You look *pissed*."

"Peter and Julie decided to be a couple," I complained.

"I didn't see that one coming!" Ashley said.

"Me neither, obviously."

"You still have Bob, right?"

"Yes, but I bet you anything you care to wager he'll ask his friend Meghan to be his girlfriend at some point because I told him it was just for fun, the same as I did Peter."

"And you can't get Philip to even talk about fucking, let alone get him to do it!"

"I know! Why does Loki hate me so much?"

"I'm positive you're a great fuck, Birgit, but if you tell guys you just want to have fun, that's all it will be and they'll eventually find a girlfriend. I warned Stephie about Nicholas. She's lucky his hormones haven't kicked into high gear!"

"Why is my eleven-year-old sister so wise?" I complained.

Ashley smirked, "Besides being quiet, I think and I know things!"

"Ha ha."

"What are you going to do?"

"Keep seeing Bob until he breaks it off, and keep working on Philip. Maybe I should talk to some of the guys on Jesse's hockey team."

"Make sure you talk to Jesse first."

"I know. I was already going to do that for Fangsu who's looking for a boyfriend but thinks the guys at the lab school are lame."

"They mostly are. I haven't seen one who I'd compare to any of the cousins."

"And all of them are too young for me except Peter," I grouched. "I can't WAIT to go to Sweden!"

"You decided not to stay with Kjell, right?"

"I'd have to give up my freedom for the year, and I don't want to do that. I'll see him, of course, but not exclusively."

"Then you have to be prepared for him to have a girlfriend," Ashley said.

"You're just full of good news!" I complained.

"You make your bed, you lie in it! With your legs spread!"

I laughed, "Just wait!"

"When the time is right, the guy is right, and the opportunity presents itself. I'm not you, who was ready to give it up at twelve!"

"What-ever!" I said. "I need to do homework."

"OK. I think if you chill you're more likely to get what you want."

"Maybe," I allowed.

I left the sunroom and went up to my room to do my homework.

XLII. A Fantasy

November 5, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

I had said I was going to do homework, but instead I decide to write in my diary. Well, it was on the computer now, not in a book, but I still called it 'writing in my diary'. I was totally frustrated by Peter and Julie and by Philip, and annoyed with my little sister, who I hated to admit might be right. If only I'd kept my desire secret until my birthday and had committed to complete secrecy, I might have had my deepest, darkest fantasy fulfilled. I'd thought about writing it out before, and decided not to, but...

The day I turned fourteen was going to be the most special day of my life! When I got out of bed, I went into the bathroom, shut the door, and turned on the shower. I pulled my sleep shirt over my head and tossed it on the sink, then stood in front of the full-length mirror which Dad had hung on the back of the bathroom door.

I admired my body, which had developed nicely -- my boobs were round and firm, with light brown nipples; my stomach was almost perfectly flat and toned; my blonde pubic hair was neatly trimmed so that my plump, perfectly symmetrical labia could easily be seen; my legs were toned from karate, as was my butt, which all the guys stared at. Eat your heart out, Mom!

I turned on the shower and set the controls as hot as I could stand. My first order of business was shaving my legs and underarms to make them perfectly smooth. I squirted some gel into my palm and rubbed it under my arms, then carefully drew the razor along my skin, removing every trace of hair. I repeated that with each leg, and briefly

considered shaving my pubic hair, but to me, it was a sign of being a woman, and I didn't want to look like a little girl, especially not on a day I hoped would be very special!

I was wet, and not from the shower, just thinking about how I wanted to celebrate my birthday. I was so tempted to rub myself, but I'd done that in bed the night before, thinking about what it would be like to be with Dad. I wondered how his beard would feel on my thighs and how his tongue would feel and how I would feel as he made me a woman. I knew I was going to get overheated, so I turned the shower controls to make the water cold, which helped the feeling go away.

I turned the water back to hot, then got my cherry blossom-scented shampoo and washed my hair, then picked up my lavender-scented soap and washed the rest of my body. Lavender was Dad's favorite scent, and I needed every advantage if I wanted to achieve my heart's desire. Once I was clean, I turned off the shower, got out, and dried off. I admired myself in the mirror again, then brushed my teeth, put on deodorant, and then put on the sexy purple lace panties and bra I'd purchased. The lady at Victoria's Secret had been very helpful and hadn't given me any trouble.

I'd considered what to wear besides that, and decided I needed to wear pants and a blouse similar to what I wore to school, so as not to make anyone suspicious. I'd settled on new black pants and a new royal blue blouse, and nobody would be suspicious because I had bought several new outfits and worn a few of them already. I brushed my hair, then added the final touch -- lipstick, which was just slightly brighter than my natural lip color. I checked myself in the mirror, then left the bathroom.

I quietly let myself out of the room and bumped into Ashley, who was in the hallway just outside my door, still in her nightgown.

"Don't be dumb, OK?" Ashley said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Ashley rolled her eyes, "We both know what you're going to ask for. Don't be dumb about it."

"It's none of your business!" I said firmly.

"Oh, yes it is!" Ashley declared. "Whichever way it goes, if you're dumb about it, you could wreck our family! Just be smart."

"You're not going to tell, are you?"

"My lips are sealed," Ashley said. "So long as you aren't dumb about it!"

I rolled my eyes and moved past her. As I went down the stairs, I heard her go into her room, and I made my way to the sunroom, where Dad was waiting.

"Happy birthday, Pumpkin!" he exclaimed, holding out his arms.

I rushed to him to give him a big hug. He wrapped his arms around me and I wrapped mine around him. I hugged him tightly, pressing my body against his, imagining what it would be like if we were naked with him on top of me. I breathed deeply, smelling his soap and deodorant.

"Thanks, Dad!" I replied.

"How does it feel to be fourteen?" he asked.

Old enough to make love! That's how it felt! But I wasn't quite ready to ask. We finished our hug, then got into the chaise. Dad put his arm around me and I snuggled close.

"Any big plans for your birthday?" Dad asked.

Oh, I had some alright! Dad always asked all the kids that question on the morning of their birthdays, and I knew that was the opening I needed.

"Cuddles to start," I said.

"Obviously," Dad replied.

"But you know what I really want?" I asked, sure that he had no idea what was coming.

Well, both of us would be coming if I played my cards correctly!

"What's that?" Dad asked.

"You know how much I love you, right?"

"Yes, of course," Dad replied.

"And I know how much you love me."

"I hope so."

"I want something very special," I said. "Something only you can give me."

"Pumpkin..." Dad said, but I put my finger on his lips.

I took a deep breath, then told him what I wanted.

"My fondest wish, what I desire more than anything in the whole world, is to be with you. I want you to scoop me in your arms, carry me to a bed, undress me, kiss me all over, then make love to me for hours and hours. It would be like nothing I've ever felt before, and I'm sure I can make you feel really, really good! Please, Dad? Please make love to me?"

"Pumpkin..." Dad protested.

"Dad," I said as lovingly and as sweetly as I could, "you made love with Kristin for her birthday, and I know you love me so much more than you love her!"

"How did you know...never mind!" Dad said, shaking his head.

"I want you, Dad," I whispered. "I want to do everything with you. It'll be so amazing to feel you inside me! Please?"

"Birgit," Dad said, "we can't make love."

He had a point, because I couldn't be his wife or his girlfriend.

"Then carry me upstairs, rip my clothes off, and fuck my brains out!" I growled. "I want your big, hard dick in my tight virgin pussy! I want to swallow your cum! I want your tongue in me! Your Empress commands it!"

Dad laughed, which I thought was a good sign.

"And the penalty for not following your command?"

"Torture until you do!"

"So, just like normal, then?" Dad asked.

"Ha, ha!" I replied flatly. "Dad, I love you. You love me. Will you fulfill my heart's deepest desire and make my birthday wish come true? Please?"

"You're my daughter," Dad said.

The way he said it sounded as if his will was breaking, so I decided to take a big chance, though it was something I really wanted to do. I moved my hand from his side.

"Think about how it would feel to have this in my mouth," I said as I ran a finger along his HUGE hard dick.

Dad groaned, and I knew I had him.

"Take me upstairs and fuck me, Dad," I whispered urgently. "You want it. I want it."

"Are you sure?" Dad asked quietly.

My answer was to slip my hand inside his shorts and briefs and grasp his throbbing shaft, the first time I'd ever touched a man.

"Positive," I said, squeezing my hand. "Nobody else is here..."

I shifted down and Dad didn't resist when I pulled his shorts and briefs down to reveal his gorgeous dick, the first one I'd ever seen erect. I looked up, winked, then lowered my head...

My mobile phone rang, snapping me out of my fantasy. I considered not answering it, but the display said 'Teri NYC', which meant either Marcella or her friend were calling.

"Birgit!" I exclaimed when I opened the phone to answer it.

"Hi, Birgit! It's Marcella! Do you have time to talk?"

I thought about saying 'No, I was fantasizing about fucking my dad', but I figured that was a bad idea.

"I do. What's up?"

"I met someone!" Marcella gushed, making it clear she meant a girlfriend.

"That's cool! What's she like?"

"She's nineteen and a college Freshman at NYU. She's totally awesome."

"How did you meet her?"

"She helps out in the computer lab after school. She went to the same High School and graduated last May."

"Did you know her before?"

"Yes, but she wasn't someone I was friends with."

"How did you figure it out?"

"She was helping me with a computer and I said she smelled nice. She said I did, too, so I guessed and asked if she wanted to go to Starbucks after Computer Club. We talked until I had to go home, and we're seeing each other tomorrow after class. She lives close, too!"

"That's awesome! Just be super careful."

"She's not out, either, so we can just be friends, if you know what I mean."

"I do. I'm really happy for you."

"I hope I can see you again," Marcella said. "Could you come to New York sometime? I could introduce you to a boy in my class who's cool."

That made it clear she wasn't inviting me for sex, which was OK with me.

"Maybe over Christmas break?" I suggested. "But my friend might be in Chicago. Let me find out. Should I call Teri?"

"Yes."

"Give me a few days and I'll see what I can do."

We said 'goodbye' and I closed my mobile phone. I went back to my computer and noticed a chat message in *adium*.

 Steve

"Steve, I have Dante on the line for you," Kimmy said late on Tuesday afternoon.

"Put him through, please."

Kimmy did as I asked.

"A company in Arizona, one in Boston, and two in California," Dante said. The one in Phoenix is doing the healthcare research, the other three are a networked robotics company in Palo Alto, an on-line payment company in Mountain View, and an online marketplace in Boston. I have others, but those are the ones I need reviewed for their tech. All are privately held, and none of them have taken any venture capital."

"Do you need me to physically meet anyone, or can this be done by reviewing tech specs and via phone discussions?"

"I'll leave that to you, but the one in Arizona I think you need to visit to see the tech."

"Get me the contact information and I'll get started. When do you head back to South Africa?"

"Friday. Sal will send you everything by the end of the week."

"Have a safe flight and I'll let you know what I find out."

"Thanks."

As usual, Dante hung up without formally ending the conversation. I made some notes in Outlook, then returned to coding.

 Birgit

I didn't recognize the username of the person who had contacted me. That had happened a few times, mostly older guys looking for girls, and I suspected this one was as well. Every time it had happened before, I'd just blocked the guy, but this time I was tempted to mess with him, if that's what it was. Pretending I was innocent could be a lot of fun.

ILTF72: A/S/L?

DadsPumpkin: 14/F/Chicago

ILTF72: 32/M/Milwaukee

DadsPumpkin: Aren't you a bit old for me?

ILTF72: I didn't know how old you were! Your profile just says F with no age or location.

DadsPumpkin: And now that you know?

ILTF72: That depends on if you like older guys!

DadsPumpkin: How would I know? I'm 14!

ILTF72: Do you have a boyfriend?

DadsPumpkin: No.

ILTF72: Do you have a picture?
DadsPumpkin: You first!

He sent a picture, and I rolled my eyes, deleted it, and blocked him. It wasn't the first time some random guy on the internet had sent me a 'dick pic' and I was sure it wouldn't be the last. It wasn't even that impressive!

There was a knock at the door, so I got up and opened it.

"I'm starting dinner, and it's your night to help," Yuriko said.

"Be right there! Let me just shut down my computer."

I went back to my desk, shut down the computer, then went downstairs to help with dinner. _____



November 7, 2002, Oswego, Illinois

 Matthew

"I broke up with Mark," Maggie said when she sat down next to me on the bus on Thursday morning.

"I expected that," I said. "Last night?"

"Yes. After Wednesday night bible study at church."

"He was totally surprised, wasn't he?"

"Yes. And it wasn't like I could tell him why."

"You really should have," I said, "but I understand how that could be totally awkward."

"Right!" Maggie laughed, then lowered her voice. "I don't get turned on by kissing you the way I do when I kiss Matt on stage!"

"Maggie..." I warned.

"You know I'd never interfere with you and Chelsea," Maggie said. "You two are the perfect couple!"

"I know that, and I would never cheat on Chelsea, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be careful."

"Sorry. You're right."

"It's OK. What did you want to do about Saturday?"

"You can still come into the city and hang out with Chelsea and me. You're free to bring someone along if you want."

"There isn't really anyone from church that I'd want to invite right now, and nobody in drama."

"What?" I teased. "You don't want to have a date with Nick?"

"Don't be gross! Did Tina go out with him?"

"No. Nick really is a nice guy, but his reputation is such that he's not going to have any dates before he graduates."

"Forget him!" Maggie said. "What are we doing Saturday?"

"Chelsea wants to see *The Santa Clause 2*. If it's cool with you, we'll eat in Greek Town, then go to the movie."

"That works!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Albert

WarriorChick: Want me to come to Chicago on the 29th so we can fly? CmdrAlbert: Do sailors drink?

WarriorChick: LOL! Yes! I'll bring John and Elizabeth. Think your sisters will entertain her?

CmdrAlbert: Obviously! Dad will be happy to have Commander Fitzmaurice here, and I'm sure he'll get the Navy men to hang out.

WarriorChick: Where did you want to fly?

CmdrAlbert: How about St. Louis? And see the Arch? Maybe buzz it!

WarriorChick: Negative, GhostRider, the pattern is full!

CmdrAlbert: Like that worked to prevent buzzing the tower!

WarriorChick: Check with your dad. I'll make reservations and we can stay in St. Louis overnight.

CmdrAlbert: Dad will be cool with it.

WarriorChick: Yes, but you still have to ask.

CmdrAlbert: I know! Would it be OK to invite Nicholas Evans?

WarriorChick: That's fine with me. Check with his parents.

CmdrAlbert: I will.

WarriorChick: See you then!

CmdrAlbert: Great! Albert out!

WarriorChick: Out!

"Nicholas, would you like to fly to St. Louis and stay overnight with Commander Aimee and me?"

"When?"

"The Friday and Saturday after Thanksgiving."

"We don't have hockey, so I could, I have to ask Mom and I'm not sure what she's going to say because she's so upset with your dad."

"I can talk to Tom," I said. "He can convince your mom."

"Probably. Let's play!"

I went back to where Nicholas was sitting and picked up the controller so I could, once again, 'wax his six' in *Ace Combat*.

 Steve

I'd been home from karate for about fifteen minutes when the phone in my study rang, with the Caller ID showing it was from the Quinns.

"Hi, Steve, it's Tom," he said when I answered.

"Hi, Tom. What's up?"

"Albert asked Nicholas to fly with him the weekend after Thanksgiving, and I wanted to let you know it's OK with me."

"Thanks. Albert asked at dinner and said Nicholas was going to ask you. I assume he told you they'd be spending the night?"

"Yes. Nicholas wasn't sure about hotel arrangements."

"Aimee -- Commander Shaughnessy -- usually makes them. She's never asked for reimbursement."

"I'll make sure Nicholas has money and offers her something, and pays for his meals. There is one caveat from Bethany -- Nicholas isn't to fly the plane."

I suppressed a sigh and said, "I'll make sure Albert and Aimee know that. You do realize it's perfectly safe, right?"

"It's not me, Steve. You know that."

"Sorry, you're right. How is Bethany?"

"Working on a new book."

"I'm not surprised."

"She is having trouble with publishers who want her to withdraw her older book."

"That's not happening, Tom," I said firmly. "No end runs on *Smart Teens*; *Smart Choices*."

"I know your position," he replied. "And you know mine."

"I do. See you Saturday night for Guys' Night?"

"I'll be there."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, wondering if there was *anything* at all I could do to bring Bethany back to something close to her views as expressed in her original books, but I couldn't imagine what else I could do.



November 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Go for Jesse!" I exclaimed when I answered my mobile while walking home from school on Friday afternoon.

"Jesse, it's Viktoria! How are you?"

"Pretty good. How are you?"

"Great! My parents are going to be gone tomorrow and Sunday! Dad will be at a clergy conference in Pennsylvania, and Mom is going with him. They're leaving this afternoon and they won't be home until late on Sunday."

"And?" I asked.

"What do you mean 'and'?! You KNOW what I want to do!"

"Play *Monopoly*?" I teased.

"You're not going to pass 'GO' and you sure aren't going to collect \$200 if you keep being a blockhead!"

"Well, given my last name is 'Block', that would mean I have a 'Block'-head!"

"Will you be serious?!" Viktoria whined.

"You know I'm teasing! I have a hockey game tomorrow, away against Wolcott, but otherwise, no plans."

"Could you come to my house tomorrow after hockey? And spend the night?"

"You do realize what would happen if your parents ever found out about that, right?"

"They won't find out!"

"And if they come home early for some reason?"

"They won't! And they'd call, for sure."

"It's too risky," I said. "I can pick you up and we can come back into the city, and I can take you home."

"But we lose so much time! What if I stay at your house?"

"And if your parents call to check on you?"

"Why are you being so difficult?" Viktoria whined. "I want to see you and you're finding reasons not to!"

"That's not true. I want to see you, but you have to sleep at your house and I can't sleep there with you. I could pick you up for church on Sunday morning, and we could spend the day together, and I'll get you home right after dinner. Well, unless you want to join us in the sauna."

"What is it with you wanting me to be naked in front of your brothers and your dad?!"

"It's an open invitation," I said. "Nobody is forcing you."

"And you'd do that with our family?"

"Our family?" I asked. "Seriously?"

"Hypothetically!"

"Remember what I said about nudity not implying sex? I intend to teach my kids the same thing."

"I can't even imagine my dad seeing me naked or me seeing him naked! Gross!"

As Mom Two would say, I could certainly cross Viktoria off my list, so to speak. We could have fun together, but she was far too prudish to be a potential serious girlfriend.

"Did you want me to pick you up tomorrow after my game? I could be there by 1:00pm, and I could have you home by 11:00pm, which I know is your curfew."

"OK," Viktoria replied. "And Sunday?"

"Yes. See you tomorrow afternoon!"

We said goodbye, and I closed my phone just as I walked into the driveway.

 Birgit

"What's up, Big Itch?" Jesse asked when I went into the coach house after school on Friday afternoon.

"What did I do?" I protested.

"Nothing! But you are SO easy to wind up!"

"Grr!" I growled.

"«Quod erat demonstrandum»!" Jesse said with a stupid grin.

"What-ever!" I huffed. "Can we be serious, please?"

"What's up?"

"Fangsu is looking for a boyfriend, and the guys at the Lab School are basically a bunch of immature idiots. I was thinking about one of the guys from the hockey team, but I don't know which ones are dating and which ones are available."

"Nicholas?" I asked.

"Stephie would murder us in our sleep, even though she claims she's not interested in Nicholas."

"She is the dangerous one to cross!"

"And Ashley is the truly dangerous one!" I declared.

Jesse laughed, "Only because she doesn't have a big mouth like one of my sisters who will remain nameless, but has the initials B-E-A!"

"What-ever! Which guy?"

"Either Mitch or Owen," I said. "Neither of them has a girlfriend. Mitch was seeing Jen Sommers, but they broke up."

"Do you know why?"

"She was way too clingy and possessive. She didn't like him even hanging out with the hockey team without her around. He couldn't take it any longer!"

"I know girls like that and they drive me nuts!" I said. "Fangsu is coming out with us tonight. Will the guys be there?"

"Mitch will, but Owen has some family thing tonight."

"Cool," I replied. "Giordano's and then back to the house to hang out?"

"That's the plan," Jesse said. "I checked with Dad and nobody has any plans that would interfere with playing pool, video games, or whatever."

"Also, if you're interested in meeting a cute girl from Syria, my friend Zahra said she wouldn't mind being Jesse's Girl!"

"Muslim?" Jesse asked.

"Yes, but not fanatical."

"I don't know," Jesse said.

"You should at least talk to her," I said.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Awesome. See you in about three hours."

I left the coach house and went back to the main house where Tiffany, Hannah, and Naomi were waiting for me.

 Steve

Just before it was time to head home, *adium* chimed to let me know I had a message. I laughed at the username, drawing a quizzical look from Penny, which I ignored.

SongOfSolomon7: Steve Adams?

NIKASteve: Yes.

SongOfSolomon7: This is Blanchette.

NIKASteve: I guess that makes me the Big Bad Wolf!

SongOfSolomon7: I hope so!

NIKASteve: Great IM name!

SongOfSolomon7: Talia was sure you would understand the reference.

NIKASteve: One of my favorite passages.

SongOfSolomon7: Can we meet?

NIKASteve: Yes. I'm free tonight if you are.

SongOfSolomon7: Meet at a restaurant close to Trinity?

NIKASteve: Caution is wise. Which one?

SongOfSolomon7: Grandma's Table.

NIKASteve: LOL! A perfect place for Red to meet the Big Bad Wolf!

SongOfSolomon7: Then, if we like each other enough, we can go someplace private.

NIKASteve: I can be there by 6:00pm.

SongOfSolomon7: See you then! Meet just inside the door. You'll know who I am!

NIKASteve: Sounds good. See you then.

SongOfSolomon7: See you!

I picked up my mobile phone and sent a group text to Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne saying I wouldn't be home for dinner and that I might have a guest when I did arrive home. Once I'd done that, I used MapQuest to get directions to the restaurant, and printed them out. I was just about to pack up when Julia used the intercom to ask me to come to her office.

"Called to the principal's office?" Penny asked. "What did you do now?"

"Nothing that would get me in trouble at work! And besides, you know it's Liz who administers the Rod of Correction!"

"I wouldn't mind being corrected by your rod!" Penny smirked.

"Get Terry's permission, then get Kara's permission, then get Liz's permission."

"Seriously?!"

"Yes, but good luck with THAT because, if by some bizarre chance Terry would agree, neither Kara nor Liz would."

"You're just no fun!"

I winked, leaned over and kissed her cheek, then walked to Julia's office.

"What's up?"

"Brenda arranged for us to test Blackberry 6150s and I thought you were a good candidate. Are you OK with carrying two mobile devices?"

"It's probably a good idea to separate my personal and work mobiles," I said. "So yes. Who else is in the test group?"

"Brenda, obviously, and Larry Jefferson's team."

"That sounds about right," I said. "I take it this is something we'd roll out company-wide if we like the devices?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Sometime in early December. Brenda will let you know."

"Great."

Julia's phone buzzed, and she pressed the speaker button.

"Is my brother there?" Stephanie asked.

"I am," I answered.

"Come see me, please."

"Be right there."

Julia pressed the button to disconnect the call, and I walked down the hallway to Stephanie's office.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Shut the door, please."

I did as she asked.

"There's still a holdup on tearing down the Annex," Stephanie said. "Think you could schmooze Alderman Burnett?"

"It's fitting that our Alderman here is a felon convicted of armed bank robbery!"

Stephanie laughed, "I know, right? We need someone to grease the skids, and I think it has to be him, unless you know someone in the Mayor's office with enough pull to override any objections Alderman Burnett might have."

"I don't, unfortunately. But why me?"

"Who can schmooze better than you? You basically tamed Dante, and if you can do that, you can schmooze anyone! Ditto with Noel Spurgeon!"

"And look how well THAT worked out," I replied.

"You got to bang his smoking hot daughter for years! With his approval!"

"This is where Birgit or Stephie would say 'what-ever!' and roll their eyes. I'll have Kimmy see if she can set up a lunch. We are a large employer in his ward, so he should at least take the meeting. From a 'carrot and stick' point of view, are we willing to move?"

"Are *you*?" Stephanie countered.

"Being within walking distance of the Metra stations and the L is important to the staff, so I think we're limited in that way. That said. I could see a place that was along one of the L lines. I'll drop a hint that if we can't rebuild the Annex, we won't have a choice except to move."

"That sounds good. Next problem -- even if we get approval on Monday, we couldn't start demolition until sometime next summer, and that would depend

on finding space where we could move everyone. Until we have approval, it's foolish to even look for space given we can't commit. We need an ironclad guarantee that we can complete the project once we start."

"You know that's impossible," I replied. "The best we can do is ensure the Alderman stays onside. If we lose him, we're toast. If we have him, we're in reasonably good shape."

"Then make that happen!"

"I'll do my best!"

"Your best? Your best? Losers whine about doing their best!" Stephane smirked.

"Well, all things being equal, the girls I fuck are WAY hotter than the Prom Queen!"

"Including me, once upon a time," Stephanie said lovingly.

"Including you, once upon a time."

"I know it caused problems, Steve, but I have no regrets. None at all."

"I think..." I started to say.

"You did nothing wrong," Stephanie said firmly. "My problem was thinking that it could be permanent. If I'd had the right perspective, none of the bad stuff would ever have happened."

"I still feel responsible," I said.

"I don't blame you, and you shouldn't blame yourself," Stephanie said firmly. "I know what Birgit wanted, and she made the same mistake I did, which is why you had to say 'no' to her."

"She's fishing for an answer to why I said 'no', but I can never tell her about us, because at that point, I'd lose any real defense."

"Jessica would object, right?"

"I made it clear to Birgit that I'd said 'no' because of me, and her moms didn't factor into the decision because they didn't need to."

"And had she had kept it secret, and just wanted to fuck?" Stephanie asked with a smirk.

"I don't do 'what if?' and you know it!"

"Coward!" Stephanie teased, then said, "Sorry."

"In this case, speculation isn't profitable in any way."

"Can I ask you something? You can obviously refuse to answer, but did you fantasize about her in any way?"

"No. And I suspect that was because I felt I'd hurt you badly."

"I hurt me, Big Brother, not you. And we're both in a totally different place now, and it's simply a fond memory."

"Things seem to be very good with Joel."

"He curls my toes!" Stephanie smirked.

I laughed, "Exactly what Katt said to her dad about me!"

"TELL me about it!" Stephanie declared. "Anyway, let me know if you have any success with Alderman Burnett."

"Will do."

I left her office and headed back to mine.

 Matthew

"Hi, Matt!" Chelsea exclaimed when I walked into the townhouse on Friday evening.

"Hi!" I replied, giving her a quick kiss. "Maggie broke up with Mark."

"No surprise," Chelsea said. "It was kind of obvious that was going to happen. How is she?"

"Fine, I think. She's still planning on coming into the city tomorrow."

"And you're hoping for a threesome?" Chelsea asked with a smirk.

"If I were my dad, it wouldn't just be 'hoping', it would be a lock!" I said with a grin. "But I'm not my dad, and you know I don't want to be with anyone besides you."

"And if I offered you a 'hall pass'?"

I couldn't help but laugh, "Given there's a zero possibility that would happen, it doesn't matter."

"Humor me!" Chelsea said.

"You know Maggie and I like each other, but you also know I *love* you and have no interest in other girls, by themselves, in threesomes, or whatever."

"No fantasies at all?"

"Only about you! And I get to live those out every day!"

"We don't see each other every day!"

"You know what I meant!" I chuckled. "Turn the tables -- do you want to be with any other guy?"

"No, of course not!"

"There you have it. We'll both live our entire lives never having even kissed anyone else!"

"Maggie?"

"Stage kisses aren't real kisses!"

"So screwing on camera isn't real sex?" Chelsea asked.

"I think there might be a small difference between a peck on the lips on stage and fucking on film or videotape!"

"You've had a couple of sexier kisses."

"Is that a problem?" I asked.

"No, just me pointing out that it wasn't just a peck on the lips every time. And yes, I agree there's a difference between porn and stage kisses!"

"I would hope so! Are you ready to head to Hyde Park to meet Jesse, Birgit, and their gang?"

"I need two minutes, then we can go."

 Steve

"Who's your potential guest?" Kara asked when she called as I drove to Deerfield.

"Talia's friend. She wanted to meet and see if, to use her words, we like each other enough."

"What's not to like, Snuggle Bear? You're handsome, sweet, and amazing in bed!"

"And you know that attraction is more than that, not to mention she has no way to judge my skills!"

"I'm sure Talia gave you a score of 10.0! They always do!"

"Not quite true," I replied. "You know there have been girls who were non-plussed."

"Very few! The normal result is that their libido is unleashed!"

"I might know someone like that!" I chuckled. "And all it took was once kiss in the parking lot of Cork 'N Cleaver!"

"When your tongue touched mine, I tingled between my legs. The second kiss made me so wet I wanted you right then and there, on the hood of your car!"

"That would have been wild, but I think it was better the way it turned out. If we had just fucked, I'm not sure we'd be where we are now."

"Probably not. I'm very happy we fell in love."

"Me, too!"

"Have fun! See you when you get home! Or maybe not!"

I laughed, "As if you'd go to bed without ogling Little Red Riding Hood!"

"Maybe," Kara said primly.

"I love you, Honey!"

"I love you, too, Snuggle Bear!"

We said 'goodbye' and I closed the phone which had been on speaker on the seat next to me. A few minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. I parked my BMW, got out, put on my hat, and walked into the restaurant. Rejecting the idea of the most non-fortuitous coincidence in the universe, I walked up to a girl wearing a red cape with a hood.

"Little Red Riding Hood, I presume?" I said to the blue-eyed, ruby-lipped girl with wisps of blonde hair peeking out from under the hood.

"What a deep voice you have!" she said with a smile.

"The better to greet you with."

"Goodness, what big eyes you have!"

"The better to see you with."

"And what big hands you have!"

"The better to embrace you with."

"What a big mouth you have."

"The better to eat you with!" I said with a smirk.

"I bet! Shall we get a booth?"

I asked the hostess to seat us in a booth, which she did, then handed us menus. A waitress came over immediately and took our drink orders.

"You knew the lines!"

"I did, though I considered changing the last line to 'the better to drink blended wine from your goblet!'"

"What church were you raised in?"

"Roman Catholic, but I quit around age fifteen. Since then I've studied holy texts from around the world. What church do you attend?"

"Kishwaukee Bible Church in DeKalb."

"What would you like me to call you?"

"Danielle," she replied, taking down her hood, revealing long, blonde hair.

"How much did Talia tell you about me?" I asked.

"That you're the perfect guy for a girl who wants to be bad."

"May I ask why?"

The waitress returned with our drinks and asked if we were ready to order. We asked for a few minutes, looked over the menu, and then signaled we were ready.

"Health nut?" she asked. "Sparkling water and a salad with grilled chicken?"

"I have a minor health condition, so I have to watch my carbohydrate intake."

"Diabetes?"

"No. It's a hormonal imbalance, but it's completely controlled by limiting my carbs."

"As for why, I want to walk into my church and say the same thing Ariel did in *Footloose!*"

"And you could do that without *actually* doing anything."

"Lie in church?" she asked with a laugh. "No way!"

"I believe fornicating is considered worse than lying!"

"I was joking!" Danielle exclaimed.

"Me, too!"

"As I told Talia...you know her real name, right?"

"Yes."

"As I told her, I want to do something radical and extreme. My own personal Declaration of Independence. Talia said she told you my parents basically picked my husband for me when I was five."

"You could just say 'no'."

"I want to make a statement," Danielle said. "To be able to tell my dad and Robert exactly what I've done."

"And then?"

"Get a job, find a guy like John, Tabitha's boyfriend, and live my life the way I want to, not the way my dad and my pastor want me to!"

"College?"

"Yes, eventually, but not for my M-R-S!"

"How do you know Tabitha?"

"Through Talia. I met John, too. Tabitha said she'd have stayed with you but you already have a full house! Three wives and two girlfriends!"

I laughed, "That is one way to put it! Did Talia and Tabitha tell you the requirements?"

"I'm eighteen and have a clean STI test. Tabitha said I don't need birth control because you had a vasectomy. I also read the same book they did, and both gave me some pointers."

The waitress brought our food, and we began to eat.

"What happens after dinner is up to you," I said.

"I want to be bad," she said. "Very, very bad!"

XLIII. One Seriously Warped Individual

November 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

Danielle and I finished eating, I left a tip on the table, then went to the register to pay. Once I'd done that, we left the restaurant.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I thought that was clear!" Danielle replied with a soft laugh.

"How did you get here?"

"Talia drove me. She promised to pick me up if I decided not to go home with you, though she thought that was unlikely."

"When do you need to be back?"

"For class at 9:00am on Monday. Can I stay the weekend?"

"For that, you'd need to ask my wives. The thing is, I do need to walk my wife to work tomorrow morning just before 6:00am, my son has a hockey game at 9:00am, I have a karate class at 1:00pm, then tomorrow night, my guy friends come over to play poker."

"Every weekend?"

"Instead of poker, my guy friends and I go out for breakfast on alternate weeks, but the other stuff is normal."

"What about during the week? I don't have class on Tuesdays. You own your company, so can you play hooky from work?"

"I could," I replied.

"Pick me up on Monday afternoon and bring me back early on Wednesday morning?"

"I could do that. And we wouldn't have any interruptions."

"You can pick me up in front of Quad 2 on Monday. What time?"

"I can be there by 6:00pm, so let's say that."

"And drop me off there around 7:30am on Wednesday?"

"Yes. I can take you back to your dorm now, so you can show me where it is for Monday. That way, Talia doesn't have to come pick you up."

"Great!"

 Birgit

"Jesse thinks you'll like Mitch," I said to Fangsu as she, Tiffany, Naomi, Hannah, and I walked to Giordano's.

"Will he want to..."

"EVERY boy wants to!" Naomi declared. "But we decide who gets to!"

"Have you?" Fangsu asked.

"No," Naomi said. "Not yet. I don't even turn fifteen until February, and I'm not Birgit!"

"NOBODY is Birgit!" Hannah declared.

"Truth!" I exclaimed. "I'm the only one of all of us who has, and Naomi is exactly right. The boys all want it, but we decide which ones get it and when!"

"Which makes it VERY easy to get them to do what we want!" Tiffany said, causing the rest of us to laugh.

"You really do that?" Fangsu asked. "Use it to get what you want?"

"Not like make them buy stuff, or whatever, but get them to behave," Tiffany said. "Boys tend to be really dumb."

"Like Troy Simms!" Fangsu said.

"Who's that?" Tiffany asked.

"A boy at school who I liked, but then he pulled down a Muslim girl's scarf."

"How rude!" Tiffany exclaimed.

"Birgit threatened to cut off his penis and testicles and make him eat them!" Fangsu declared.

Hannah, Naomi, and Tiffany all laughed.

"Sounds about right to me!" Hannah declared. "Of course, for the right boy, I'd be happy to have it in my mouth!"

"You'd do that?" Fangsu asked.

"For the right guy? Absolutely."

"Girls who say it's gross are wrong," I said. "I know from experience!"

"I don't know if I'm ready for that...or anything else," Fangsu said.

"Do not let a boy pressure you," Hannah said. "You only do what you want, with who you want, when you're ready."

When we arrived at Giordano's, I introduced Fangsu to Mitch, then went to sit next to Philip. I thought about kissing him, but the last thing I wanted to do was attract attention to our age difference and the fact that, despite him being a nerd, I liked him.

 Steve

"You're alone?" Kara asked when I walked into the house later on Friday evening.

"With walking Jess to work, hockey, karate, and Guys' Night, Little Red Riding Hood and I agreed on Monday night; I'll take Tuesday off work. She actually asked for two nights, but I explained she'd have to ask your permission for that."

"I might be willing to negotiate!" Kara said impishly.

"She did say she wanted to be very, very bad!" I replied with a grin.

Kara and I exchanged a hug and kiss, then I hugged and kissed Jessica, and we headed up to our room so that I could change.

"Suzanne is out with the Coven," Jessica said

"Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble." I said.

My other two wives laughed at the Macbeth reference.

"One of the ingredients is some part of a Tiger!" Jessica exclaimed.

"Actually," I replied, "it's most likely a reference to a plant -- Lady's mantle, which has lobed leaves that resemble a tiger's mane. If the analysis we read at Milford Junior High was correct, most of the ingredients are actually references to plants, with many of the names no longer applied to them."

"Does Little Red Riding Hood have a name?" Kara asked.

"Danielle," I replied. "She has the same idea you did when you were sixteen, though she's eighteen. She showed up wearing a red cape with a hood, and tested me with the lines from the fairy tale."

"The better to eat you with!" Kara smirked.

"Her IM moniker is SongOfSolomon7," I chuckled.

"That's just perfect!" Kara declared.

"The kids are coming back here after dinner," I said. "So we should make ourselves scarce."

"Whatever could the three of us do to occupy ourselves for the next four hours?" Kara asked, pulling her sweatshirt over her head.

It turned out I didn't need to put on any clothes until much, much later.

 Birgit

"Can we discuss something privately?" I asked Philip when the gang had returned to my house to hang out after our pizza dinner.

"Sure," Philip said.

I took his hand and led him to my room where I shut the door and we sat on the love seat.

"You know what I want to do, right?"

"I'd say that's been obvious from the first time you spoke to me! But..."

"You can't get past that I'm only fourteen; well and a half. I'll be fifteen in May. But I want to say some things, and I just want you to listen, OK?"

"Yes."

"You know I'm not a virgin, and I haven't been since before I met you. I suspect that you might never have done it, and that's OK because everyone has to decide the right time. You know I want to do it with you, and I'm pretty sure you want to do it with me, but you're concerned I'm too young, but I'm not. As I said, everyone has to decide when it's right for them, and for me it was July 17th, about three weeks after my fourteenth birthday.

"Think about how I behave, and I'm sure you'll agree that I don't act like a typical fourteen-year-old girl. I'm a mature, intelligent, self-confident, sexy young woman, not a clueless, giggly teenager. I mean, I do giggle at times, sure, but overall, I act like an adult, not a little kid, and you should see me as a young adult, or young woman, not as a little girl.

"I also know you're worried about my dad, but you shouldn't be. I want you to spend the night sometime soon, and I'll ask my dad in front of you. He'll say something like 'have fun, but remember the rules', and you'll know he's OK with it, as are my moms. There are only two rules my dad and moms made. The first one is that I always have to use birth control, and I'm on the Pill, which I told you, so that's covered.

"The second is that anyone I want to be with has to have an STI test, no matter if they're experienced or not. I'm not sure how much you know about the transmission of STIs, but it's possible to get them in ways other than directly exchanging bodily fluids. I'm positive you aren't using IV drugs, and unless you had a blood transfusion before 1987, the risk is tiny, but the rules are inviolable.

"It's easy enough to get a test at the clinic at IIT, so I want you to do that, and once you receive the results, I want you to spend the night with me. Nobody but my family will know, and none of them will object. And if you're worried about never having done it, I promise I can teach you everything you need to know to make me feel really good, and I promise I can make you feel really good."

I'd said my piece, so I simply stopped talking and waited.

"I'm six years older than you are, and..." Philip said.

"So what?" I interrupted. "In eight years I'll be twenty-two and you'll be twenty-eight and nobody would even think twice!"

"I was going to say, before you interrupted, that you're way more experienced than I am."

"Sorry," I said. "I'll be quiet and let you talk."

"You're right that I'm concerned about your age, but that's mostly because of the crazy amount of trouble I could be in if anyone ever found out, which is what I told you at the Halloween party. You're right about not having done it, and you might have guessed that was my first kiss when we kissed that night. I just never had much luck with girls, and I'm not used to girls hitting on me, and I've definitely never had one who said she wanted to have sex with me."

I sensed he was done, so I felt I could respond.

"It's normal to be nervous," I said. "I was, when I had my first time, and I had planned it in advance. He hadn't done it before, but we figured it out! Will you do something for me?"

"What's that?"

"Get the test so we don't have to worry about that; you aren't committing to anything."

"Why me?" he asked.

"Because I like you! You're nice, good looking, and in good shape! And I know you like me, because you spend time with me."

Not to mention the reaction he'd had when we danced, but I actually didn't get a good feel because he'd shifted positions too quickly.

"Do you want to kiss me before we go back downstairs?" I asked hopefully.

Philip nodded, and we exchanged a soft kiss. I didn't push for more than one, partly because I couldn't go beyond kissing, but partly because I didn't want to scare him away. All I could do was hope he got the test and see what happened after that.



November 9, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Any special plans for today?" Jessica asked me as Kara, Suzanne, and I walked her to the hospital on Saturday morning.

"The usual," I replied. "Cuddle time with Birgit, breakfast, Jesse's hockey game, lunch, my afternoon karate class, and then Guys' and Girls' nights. Matthew and Chelsea will join us tonight, and she'll go out with the girls."

"Have those two ever had a single second when they weren't the perfect couple?" Suzanne asked.

I chuckled, "Ask Matthew about what happened when he was five and she declared she was going to marry him. Elyse and I thought he was going to run away! But it didn't take all that long for him to get used to the idea, and I actually had to increase the minutes on our cell plan to accommodate them!"

"Tiger, did you hear from Dante?"

"I did! I should have mentioned it last night, but in all the excitement, I forgot!"

"You fired six shots, not five!" Kara declared impishly.

"Oh, sure, and I wasn't there!" Suzanne faux whined.

"You were out wreaking havoc with your Coven!" Kara countered. "Your choice!"

"Ignore them, Tiger! What did he say?"

"There are five companies to review, four of which I most likely do not have to travel, just get the prospectus and talk with the techies. He wants me to actually see the tech at a company in the Phoenix area. They're working on Continuous Glucose Monitoring devices, and researching non-invasive testing."

"Oh! Sexy!" Jessica exclaimed.

The rest of us laughed, because Jessica only appreciated technology that had direct application to the practice of medicine.

"Dante thinks the non-invasive testing is at least a decade away, potentially two or three, but the CGM is the real deal. I don't know much about it, so I'll do some research and speak to Mary at Mayo to get an understanding beyond the lancet, test-strip, and monitor setup I use."

"And we get something for that, right?" Kara asked.

"A thousand a month in fees, plus all expenses, and then a taste of any IPO. If any of the companies hit, our taste would be somewhere in the six-figure range, possibly higher. Of course, most startups flounder and fail, so it might turn out to be nothing. That said, Dante sees this as a continuing relationship, so there will be plenty of opportunities."

"We have some through Samantha, too, right?"

"Yes. That's how we got in on the PayPal IPO. As always, it's as much who you know as anything else."

"Hi, Jess!" Allyson called out as we crossed the street just north of the hospital.

"Hi, Ally!"

"Thanks for trading with Jessica," I said to Allyson.

"You're welcome! Did she tell you what I wanted in trade?"

"Of course I did!" Jessica declared. "What better way to tease my husband than tell him a pretty blonde doctor is interested?"

She was about our age, and was, indeed, very pretty, though she was wearing what I'd taken to thinking of as 'ER drab' clothes, which she'd swap for scrubs as soon as she was in the locker room. 'ER drab' was muted colors and loose-fitting, and Jess had started dressing that way as soon as she'd become an Attending, except on days she had to teach.

"You know," I said slyly, "there are exceptions to every rule...I'll leave it to you and Allyson to work that out!"

Kara, Suzanne, and I all hugged and kissed Jessica, and after she and Allyson had gone into the hospital, Kara, Suzanne, and I turned and headed for home.

"Interested?" Kara asked.

"I was actually teasing," I said. "She's pretty, no doubt, but we have rules for a reason, and breaking them on a whim seems like a very bad idea. Especially when things are calm across the board. Even Stephie is in a good mood most of the time!"

 Jesse

"Just you today?" Libby asked when she and Lilibeth got into the minivan at her house on Saturday morning.

"I'm more than YOU can handle!" I declared.

"Oh, please!" Libby exclaimed, rolling her eyes. "Physiology is NOT in your favor!"

"Well, sure, if you just lie there!" I teased. "As usual."

"GIVE ME A BREAK!" Libby protested. "You *know* that's not true from first-hand experience!"

"So you say!" I said as I pulled away from the curb.

"I should fuck your dad! Maybe he's better!"

I laughed, "Believe whatever you want! And do whatever you want, but you know what it means if you do."

"Hmm. Never be with Jesse again? That might be a *good* thing!" Libby teased.

"WAIT!" Lilibeth objected. "You'd do it with Jesse's dad? He's *ancient*!"

I laughed, "I'll let him know you said that!"

"He's like forty, right? That's almost three times as old as I am!"

"You're fifteen and he's thirty-nine," I replied. "So more like two-and-a-half."

"And so what?" Libby asked. "He's good looking and in good shape!"

"I could take him in an instant!" I declared.

"Maybe in a wrestling match, because you're bigger and stronger, but he'd kick your tail feathers before you could lay a webbed foot on him!"

"Hardy-har-har!"

"Seriously, Lib," Lilibeth asked. "You would?"

"Sure! Not just any random guy that age, but Jesse's dad? Yes, please!"

I made fake gagging sounds, causing both girls to laugh.

"Seriously," I said. "If you want to, go for it, but then we're simply friends."

"Who are you playing today?" Lilibeth asked, clearly changing the subject.

"Chicago South," I said. "It's Wolcott College Prep with players from De La Salle and Jones Prep, similar to our combined team."

"Where do they play?"

"Morgan Park Sports Center. It's a Park District Rink at 115th and Western."

"How many more games do you have in your season?"

"Three after today. Then there's the long break for Christmas, and playoffs start in January."

"You were citywide champions when you were a Freshman, right?"

"Yes," I replied. "Do NOT ask about last year!"

"They crashed hard out of the playoffs!" Libby exclaimed.

"Thank you so much for bringing up such a painful subject! While you're at it, why don't you give me a nice paper cut and pour lemon juice on it?" I said in my best Miracle Max impression.

Both girls laughed.

"I didn't *ask*," Libby said with a smirk.

"You and Birgit are SO much alike," I said, shaking my head.

"I'll take that as a compliment!" Libby declared.

"You would!" I chuckled.

 Steve

"Julie?" I asked in surprised when Julie Moran sat down next to me. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you without either of our daughters knowing about it. They're with the girl gang and I knew you'd be here."

"We have about fifteen minutes before they drop the puck. Let's go get some coffee."

"Is anyone with you?"

"No, but Jennifer and Josie should be here any moment, and I saw Libby and Lilibeth when I came in."

We got up and went to the concession stand where I bought us each a cup of coffee, then we went to a small table against the wall, away from the others.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I had the heart-to-heart talk with Tiffany," she said.

"How did that go?"

"I'm sure this won't surprise you, but it surprised me how mature and well-informed she is, and how well-reasoned her ideas are."

"That doesn't surprise me in the least. I told you I thought she was mature."

"Not because of me, though; because of Birgit. I'd say that's true for the other two girls in their inner circle, too -- Naomi and Hannah. Rachel is a bit older, and I guess Birgit mostly keeps her school friends and Girl Gang separate, except for one girl."

"Fangsu," I said. "I actually saw her here when I came in, along with another girl from the Lab School."

"How is the education there?"

"Very good, though I have a serious problem with their attitude towards sports. They're basically 'everyone plays because sports are for fun' and skill and merit aren't rewarded."

"I'm not surprised that you don't like that. You run your company as a meritocracy, according to the women from there who come to Girls' Night Out."

"Well, my sister runs it now, but yes, that's a guiding principle."

"I suppose the short version of my answer to your question is that I can't be a hypocrite."

"You do realize you told me two different stories, right?" I asked. "In one, you met Jim when you were seventeen and he was twenty-two, and that he was the only guy you'd slept with. In the other, you told me you lost your virginity at fifteen."

"Busted," Julie said. "Fifteen was a one-time thing, much to my regret, and then Jim. But he never knew that I wasn't a virgin when we met."

"Now you have me curious."

"The last night of summer camp," she said. "I was fifteen, and he was a male counselor who was in his thirties."

"And there we have the true source of your statement that you can't be a hypocrite."

"Yes. I'm sorry I lied to you."

I shrugged, "You didn't owe me an explanation."

"Why didn't you call me on it?"

"To what end?" I asked. "I was sure there was some basic truth -- you lost your virginity at fifteen and were faithful to Jim after you met him. I'm not *entitled* to know the details, so I didn't let it bother me."

"I had flirted with the counselor, Stu, for the entire two weeks of camp in the way teenage girls flirt with adult guys, of which I'm sure you're aware."

"I might have some experiences that match that," I chuckled.

"On the last night there was a mixer, and I was bored and didn't want to dance with any of the guys, so I went outside to look at the stars and he came out to have a cigarette. He asked what I was doing, and I said I was bored. He asked if I wanted to do something fun and exciting, I said 'yes', and twenty minutes later I was no longer a virgin. It was OK, I guess, for a first time, but he seemed to have really enjoyed it. The next time was my wedding night."

"And the regrets?" I asked.

"That I did it? No. That I was totally passive until I was with you? Yes."

"And now?"

Julie laughed, "Well, JT is very happy, so I'll let you draw your own conclusions from that!"

JT seemed like a good guy, and he'd actually joined us for breakfast on a few occasions.

"What does Tiffany think?"

"You were right about that, too, you bastard!" Julie declared. "She knew I had been with you and she knew I was fucking JT."

"Kids are not nearly as clueless as most adults believe they are, and even if most kids were that clueless, the Girl Gang is absolutely clued in better than most adults."

"That's for sure. My daughter asked if I swallowed!"

I laughed hard, happy that I hadn't been drinking my coffee when she'd said that.

"And what did you say?"

"I told the truth; I hope you don't mind."

"I don't. What was the end result?"

"I gave her my views, but said she was free to make her own decision. Are you going to do it if she asks?"

"I'm not ruling it out," I replied. "I would if you said 'no'."

"And as I said, she'd hate me forever if I did that. But it's not just that, it's that she demonstrates maturity I didn't know she had, is better informed at fourteen than I was after I'd had a baby, and is sure of what she wants."

"She'll need to ask Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne for permission."

Julie laughed, "You know she will! She wouldn't let that deter her! About the only thing that would deter her would be Birgit objecting, which, apparently, she doesn't. Tiffany says Birgit finds it amusing, which, while hard to believe, sounds about right for the Madhouse on Woodlawn!"

I chuckled, "Nothing about Birgit is 'normal' in any way, shape, or form!"

"Or you!" Julie declared. "I won't give my blessing or my permission, but I also won't say 'no'. Is that sufficient?"

I nodded, "Yes. And she and I will have a discussion when she decides to ask."

Julie laughed, "I was so annoyed you wanted to talk, but afterwards, I understood your point completely."

"That's good. Are you planning to watch the game?"

"No. I'm not into hockey, but as I said, I knew I could have a conversation with you without any of the girls noticing."

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"I asked Suzanne."

We finished our coffee, I walked Julie out to her car, then went back inside and sat down next to Jennifer.

"Look at you, without a girl in sight!" Josie teased. "You can't have her; she's mine!"

"I had her first!" I faux whined, pouting.

Jennifer laughed, "Steve Adams as whinging toddler! Perfect!"

Libby got up and sat next to me, and Lilibeth moved to sit on Libby's left.

"I'll be your date for the game, Mr. Adams!" she said with a silly smile. "Lilibeth won't mind!"

"I think I might survive not having a date for the game," I replied.

"But would you survive a date with me?" Libby asked with a smirk, causing Jennifer, Josie, and me to laugh.

"Guess who's been hanging around Jesse and Birgit?" Jennifer asked.

"Osama bin Laden and «al-Qā'ida» have nothing on those two!" I declared. "But the more dangerous cell is Albert, Nicholas, and Peter!"

"I don't know," Josie said. "Birgit's Girl Gang frightens **me**!"

"Me, too!" I agreed.

The horn blew, and the players skated over to the bench to get their last-minute instructions from Coach Nelson. There really wasn't much for him to say, other than to remind the team not to take their foot off the gas. We were undefeated and needed to win this game, and the next three, to be undefeated for the season and finish first in our conference.

"I'm hoping for a quick score!" Jennifer declared.

"Me, too!" Libby said, bumping her shoulder into mine.

"What got into you?" I asked.

"Nothing...yet!" she teased.

I laughed and shook my head and focused on the game unfolding in front of us. It was 'one of those games' where we had every advantage, but couldn't score, and the first period ended scoreless, despite our team having better than 70% possession.

"Too much passing, not enough shooting," I observed.

 Jesse

"Too much passing, not enough shooting!" I said to the team when we went into the locker room after the first period ended. "Puck on the net, guys!"

"Listen to your goalie!" Coach Nelson said. "Don't wait for the perfect shot! Take a good shot, crash the net, and knock in the rebound!"

We all got drinks, changed t-shirts, and then headed back to the ice for the second period. It went better, but we *still* couldn't get a puck into the net. Fortunately, Chicago South hadn't had more than a handful of shots, and thanks to strong defensive work by Mitch, Freddy, Mike, Paul, DeShawn, and Tomás, it was easy for me to turn them away.

The second intermission was a repeat of the first, but when we came out for the third period, Coach surprised us by putting the power-play team on the ice -- four forwards and Freddy as the lone defenseman. The opposing coach didn't seem to notice, and put out his first O-line and second D-line.

Coach's strategy worked, and thirty-six seconds into the third period, we had a goal when Freddy fired a hard shot from the point and Nicholas scooped up the rebound and deked the goalie and slid the puck into the net to make the game 1-0.

 Steve

"Coach called it perfectly!" Jennifer declared.

"When you need to score, you have to find a way," I observed.

"For sure!" Libby agreed, bumping her hip against mine.

The rest of the game was hard fought, and with about eighty seconds to go, Chicago South pulled their goalie.

"Empty net goal coming right up!" Josie declared.

"I have an empty net where you could score," Libby whispered, rubbing her shoulder against mine.

She was REALLY laying it on thick, and despite Libby having turned seventeen the previous week, my agreement with Jesse meant that if she was actually serious, as opposed to just teasing, my answer had to be 'no'. I was reasonably certain she was teasing, but I wasn't completely sure.

True to Josie's prediction, George, a forward on our second line, fired the puck from just over the red line and hit the net dead center to seal the game 2-0. We all leapt up and cheered, and stayed standing for the final twenty seconds. Libby slipped her arm around my waist, and I reconsidered my assessment that she was just teasing.

The team was still undefeated with three games to go, and things were looking good, so long as we didn't have another meltdown as we had in the playoffs the previous season.

 Jesse

"Great job, men!" Coach Nelson said. "Game pucks go to Nicholas and George, with an honorable mention to the entire D and Jesse for shutting down the South offense completely! Hit the showers and we'll see you on Monday morning at 5:00am for practice!"

There was a collective groan as nobody really liked the early morning practices, but I tolerated them because my afternoons were free, even if it meant to going to bed earlier than Ashley.

"Next week is Lame Tech!" Tomás declared, causing a bunch of us to laugh.

"They're fourth in the league," I said. "So not quite so lame. We're ready for them!"

"What's the scoop with the party?" Freddy asked.

"The entire softball team will be there except for the second string catcher, and everyone from our team will be there. It's almost even boys to girls, with there being two more girls, even with the one who can't make it."

"Think we could use the sauna?" he asked with what Uncle Dave called a 'shit-eating grin'.

"With bathing suits," I said. "Coach Nelson and Coach Jefferson would NEVER allow it otherwise."

"Not to mention all the crap from when Jesse had the entire softball team in there last year," Nicholas interjected.

"Talk about dying and going to heaven!" Tomás declared. "If only!"

"Stuck with your dad's *Playboy* magazines?" Owen asked.

"You have heard of this thing called the internet, right?" Tomás asked. "My dad put filter software on our computer, but it's trivial to disable and get around it."

"Jesse, you don't have filter software on your computers, right?" Mitch asked.

"As if Jesse needed to look at porn!" Pete said, shaking his head. "I know Marine divisions that get less action than Jesse!"

"Men..." Goalie Coach Mitchell warned.

"Sorry, Coach!" a bunch of us said.

We finished our showers, dressed, and left the locker room, and I went over to where my moms, my dad, Libby, Lilibeth, Fangsu, and a girl I didn't recognize were standing.

"Great game!" Dad exclaimed.

"Thanks, Pops!"

"Jesse," Fangsu said, "This is Zahra. Would you and Mitch have lunch with Zahra and me?"

If we went some place close, or between the rink and home, I could just make it to Viktoria's if I did that. The fly in the ointment, as Mom Two would call it, was the restriction on my diver's license because I wasn't eighteen. I should be able to make it if we ate someplace close to the house, though I could always call Viktoria and tell her I'd be a few minutes late.

I sized up Zahra, and her headscarf gave me pause, not because I objected, but because of my experience with Muslim girls. That said, she was a friend of Birgit's, which meant she probably knew the score, and was interested in having lunch. There was no reason not to be polite, so it made sense to accept the invitation.

"I would," I said. "I'm meeting a friend in the burbs, but I have time for lunch. The only problem is the driving rules. I can't have more than one non-sibling in the car unless a licensed driver over eighteen is in the passenger seat. How about we meet at my house, then go to the diner near the hospital?"

"That's OK with me," Fangsu said.

Mitch and Zahra both agreed as well.

"Pops," I said to my dad, "can I talk to you for a second?"

He agreed, so we stepped out of earshot.

"I forgot to ask about borrowing the car to pick up Viktoria today and to take her home this evening. I'll pick her up for church in the morning, she'll come to the house, then I'll take her home after family dinner."

"No problem," Dad said. "I don't need the car, and if something comes up, I'll just take Jessica's car with the MD plates that let me park literally anywhere!"

"So long as there's a medical emergency!" I countered. "AND if you're a doctor."

"Details, schmetails!" Dad chuckled. "Did something happen with Libby?"

I laughed, "Let me guess, she flirted with you, right?"

"Pretty aggressively," Dad replied. "How did you know?"

"She threatened to do that, well, more, when we were goofing off this morning."

"OK. I was pretty sure she was just teasing, though I'm not sure. You and I have our agreement, so that means it doesn't really matter either way."

I chuckled, "You didn't hit on her, which was the agreement. If she wants it, then it's the same as with Mia. BUT, *my* rule says that's it. I mean, if someone is willing to lower their standards and slum *that* far..."

"Listen, Little Duck!" Dad said, but he was laughing.

"Waddle off, Penguin! I need to go have lunch with my friends!"

"Have fun, Jesse."

I hurried out of the rink with Libby and Lilibeth, and once we were in the van, asked Libby about flirting with my dad.

She laughed, "I might have said that I had an empty net where he could score, among other things! What did he say?"

"He was actually concerned something had happened. You've never really flirted with him before, so he was wary, but he was pretty sure you were teasing."

"She was NOT teasing!" Lilibeth declared.

"I was," Libby retorted. "Well, OK, I *would*, but not at the cost of not being with Jesse."

I grinned, "I might have said something about you really lowering your standards and slumming!"

"Now I should, just on general principles!"

"Foolish is the man who does not count the cost!" I declared.

"Jesse, you'd be OK with it?" Lilibeth asked.

"I think it's more like 'whatever' if that's what Libby wants to do, but it would change our relationship. Remember my view -- everyone should do what they think is right and what they want to do, so long as it's consensual and nobody is hurt. It doesn't bother me that Libby is with you, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't bother you that Libby is with me."

"Now, if we could just all three get together!" Libby said wistfully.

"Gross, Libby!" Lilibeth declared. "Uh, sorry, Jesse."

"Don't be! I mean, I'd have the same reaction to being with Lee. He can do what he wants, and it's cool just not with me! I have the same aversion to dicks you do!"

Both Libby and Lilibeth laughed.

 Birgit

"Can we talk, privately?" Hannah asked me.

"Sure. It's not too cold to go out on the balcony."

And the view from Samantha's balcony was just amazing. The only downside was that soon Rachel would be moving to her own apartment in Hyde Park in January, and Javon was moving in with her. I wondered if Samantha would let us use her condo from time to time after that.

"What's up?" I asked when Hannah and I were out on the balcony looking at Lake Michigan.

"What are the rules?"

"Rules?"

"For an 'expert deflowering'! I'm fifteen now."

"An STI test, and you have to ask my moms and Suzanne because you're under seventeen. There might be other rules, but those are the two I know."

"Do you think he would?" Hannah asked.

"You fit his type perfectly! Pretty virgin teen girl with small boobs and an athletic build."

"Seriously? He prefers small boobs?"

"Yes! Look at Suzanne and my mom the medical doctor, as well as Yuriko and Natalie! Only my mom has decent boobs and I hope mine are that nice when I finish growing."

"The boys all drool over Cynthia and Missy because they have really nice boobs."

"Boys are dumb!" I declared. "Which is why you want my dad!"

"Do I have to ask all three?"

"Go to my mom; she's the First Wife and has the final say. Or you can go to Suzanne and talk with her, and have her present your case, but you have to expect then to want to talk to you."

"Because of the dumb laws, right?"

"Exactly. If you were seventeen, you'd only need permission if you wanted to spend the night with my dad."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"No! If he weren't my dad, there is no way he wouldn't have been my first!"

"Ewwwww!" Hannah exclaimed.

"I didn't say I wanted to do it with my dad, just that if he weren't my dad, he'd be the perfect guy."

Of course, I felt he would have been the perfect guy, even if he was my dad, or maybe because he was my dad, but he'd said 'no'. Thinking about it really got my mind going again, and I wondered if I should just finish the diary story and get it out of my head.

"You know Naomi wants him, too, right?" Hannah asked. "And we all know Tiffany made it clear that's what she wants."

"I guessed about Naomi," I said. "You know, if you really wanted to have a wild first time, you and Naomi could go together and see each other have their cherry popped. Or go totally crazy, and invite Tiffany, too!"

"You are one seriously warped individual, Birgit Adams!" Hannah declared.

"Don't I know it!" I giggled. "Let's go back inside."

XLIV. That's...Crazy!

November 9, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

Zahra seemed sweet, and I thought she was probably pretty, though with her hair hidden behind a scarf, and only an oval of her face available, it was hard to say what she actually looked like. But no matter how sweet and pretty she was, there was an obstacle as large as the Rock of Gibraltar between us -- our incompatible faiths. I'd been down that road with Adi, and she didn't wear a headscarf, which was usually a sign of a devout, practicing Muslim.

Mitch and Fangsu appeared to hit it off, just as Birgit and I had expected, and the four of us has an enjoyable lunch, though I had to leave as soon as we finished so that I could drive to Naperville to get Viktoria. When I got up, Zahra slipped me a piece of paper with her phone number on it and asked me to call her. To be polite, I agreed, though I felt it could go exactly nowhere.

"Come in!" Viktoria exclaimed when I arrived at her house about an hour after I'd left the diner.

"Remember what I said?"

"Yes, but they called ten minutes ago. They're in Pennsylvania and there is no way we could get caught! Even if they left right now, they wouldn't be home until late tonight. I want to do it in my bed!"

"What about your brother and sister?" I asked.

"My brother is at school in Champaign, and my sister went with my parents. There's a youth conference during the clergy meeting. Please, Jesse? I'll do anything you want!"

"Including a sauna with my family tomorrow after dinner?" I asked with a smirk.

"What IS it with you and wanting other people to see me naked?!"

"I told you it's not that," I replied. "It's about you being comfortable with your body and the two of us having a compatible view of sexuality."

"And if I didn't do that, we could never be a couple?"

"It's symbolic of an approach to life, the universe, and everything," I said. "And that difference of worldview would create tension and lead to conflict. I, my wife, my friends, their wives, and all our kids will be like my family."

"That's just gross!" Viktoria said.

"And that's why there's no chance we're ever going to be a couple."

Viktoria frowned, "I thought there was a chance..."

"Not if we don't see eye-to-eye on important concepts," I said firmly.

Viktoria's eyes narrowed the way Birgit's did when Birgit was extremely unhappy with Dad.

"Fine," she said flatly. "Go home."

I shrugged, turned, and began walking back to the car.

"Jesse?" Viktoria called out.

I stopped and turned.

"Don't call me again."

I shrugged again, turned, and continued to my car. I had been tempted to say that she had called me, but I wasn't interested in an argument. I'd wasted two hours of time, but in the end, it was better to end things if Viktoria thought they were going to lead somewhere. A relationship with her, beyond just fooling around, was nearly as impossible as one with Adi had been. And that reinforced my thinking about Zahra. I got into the car, backed out of the driveway, and headed home.

 Steve

All of my students gathered for class except Birgit, who had discussed missing both classes so she could be with her friends. Miyu led our meditation and Neil led our warm-up exercises, and then the group sparred for the remaining class period, as Neil, Dyani, and Sarah were all competing in the Thanksgiving tournament.

"I'm going to beat you once I have this baby," Miyu said with a smile at the end of class.

"Given I've barely sparred for the past decade, I think you have a better than even chance, but you should never underestimate your opponents."

"I'm not underestimating you, Sensei! I'm simply stating a fact!"

I laughed, "When your OB clears you for sparring, we'll put that to a test!"

"Where's the ruler of your universe?"

"In her dreams!" I chuckled. "She's with her Girl Gang today. She spoke to me about it before she missed this morning and this afternoon."

"You were at Jesse's game, right?"

"Yes. They're still undefeated. Remind your sister that we'd like to see her at the Compound. It's been over six months!"

"Mitsuko and Neil are so busy, but I'll remind her."

"Thanks. How much longer do you intend to come to class?"

"I'm allowed to exercise during the ninth month, but not strenuously, so next week will be the last time I do anything more than very light exercises. I'll come on Saturday afternoons, but I'll exercise at home."

"What about kata?"

"The lower level ones are OK, but anything with kicks beyond orange belt are out starting now."

"OK. Just keep me posted."

"You'll be the first to know after my family, despite Birgit thinking she should be first over anyone!"

"Birgit has delusions of world domination," I chuckled. "The rest of us don't have to participate in her delusion!"

Miyu laughed, we bowed, and she went to change while I went to the locker room to take a quick shower. After I dressed, I waited for the stragglers to leave before I locked the dojo and Avanti and I began walking towards the house.

"Mom and I discussed how to handle me spending the night with you on January 25th," Avanti said. "She booked a weekend for her and Dad in Kohler. My brother will spend the weekend with my paternal grandparents, and I'll be home alone, though with mom's blessing to be at your house as much as possible."

"Unless you want me to come to your house," I said. "Some girls have the fantasy of doing it in their own bed."

"We don't have a sauna and I don't have mirrors on my ceiling!" Avanti replied.

"Besides that, is there anything specific?"

"You're my guru, and I trust you to provide the perfect experience because you know me so well! I will do anything you ask, and you may do anything you want, limited only by your adherence to your rules about doing no harm."

"And if, as your guru, I asked you what you wanted?"

"Well, after talking to Mom, I'd request that my first time be slow and sensual, and last for as long as humanly possible. And for that to also be the last thing we do when we're together for the first time. In between, anything and everything you want, though I very much wish to taste your essence."

"I believe I can accommodate."

"Mom asked if we'd discussed what happens after the 25th, and I had to admit we hadn't."

"I think that's up to you, though my wives would have veto powers."

"Yes, of course. As my guru, I'm yours for as long as you want, until you grant me permission to be with someone else."

"That is NOT up to me," I protested.

Avanti smiled, "Yes, it is, as my guru. And when I meet a boy I want to be with, I'll bring him to you for your approval. Mom took you to see her guru, though I think the order of events was different, as she was no longer physically intimate with him."

"You know my take on that."

"Yes, of course," Avanti said, "but I agreed to submit to you. I can also revoke my submission at any time, but it would require some unexpected event for that to happen. As Sensei and guru, you should be involved in every aspect of my life, much as mom was in yours."

Anala's submissive nature had passed to her daughter, though it had a somewhat different character. And once I had agreed to be her guru, and as her Sensei, I did have an obligation to her, though I would never violate my principle that nobody could owe anyone sex, or commit irrevocably to it.

"You are very much like your mother, though different."

"Isn't that how it is? Jesse is like you, only different, just as Birgit is like Kara, only different."

"Yes."

"I know this has to be cleared with your wives, but I think once a month we have a day together, and I'll spend the night some of those times. One time I spend the night, I want to do nothing but partake of each other's essence for as long as we can be together."

"You are your mother's daughter!"

"Yes, I am!"

 Matthew

When Maggie arrived in the city, she and Chelsea spoke privately together, then we went to Lincoln Park Zoo, and finally headed to the Compound. When we arrived, the three of us went to the coach house and found Jesse in the Duck's Nest playing video games.

"I thought you had a date today," I said. "But I saw Aunt Jennifer in the main house and she said you were here."

"I was supposed to hang out with Viktoria, but she has in her mind that we're all a bunch of crazy libertines because of how we use the sauna."

"Cross her off the list, then!" I said.

"You mean being naked, right?" Maggie asked.

"Not just that," Jesse said. "But with the family. I'm sure Matthew has explained it."

"Yes," Maggie said. "My parents would lose their minds if they knew about that. I've been in the sauna with Matt, Chelsea, and Mark, but we always wore bathing suits. I know Matt and Chelsea follow your dad's practice."

"I think my mom gives my dad a run for his money in being free and open," I said. "But they have 'weekend rules' here, which are like our rules at home about bathing suits when we're with people aren't part of the family. Eduardo doesn't want to risk trouble, so Mom conceded the point. Jesse knows all about trouble! Something about a girls' softball team!"

"But only because of uptight parents and one jealous cheerleader," Jesse said. "None of the girls complained."

"And neither did you, I'm sure!" Chelsea declared.

Jesse shrugged, "You know how that is. It's not about sex."

"That was the most difficult concept I had to work through," Chelsea said.

"Do you guys want to play *Mario Kart* or do something else?" Jesse asked.

"We were thinking about a sauna," I said. "But suits because Maggie is with us. Want to join us then play *Mario Kart*?"

"Sure," Jesse said.

He shut down his game, and the four of us went to the main house, changed into bathing suits privately, and then went into the sauna.

"How was your game this morning?" I asked.

"I could have slept through it and not given up a goal," Jesse said. "Our D was rock solid. Nicholas scored the first goal, and it turned out to be the game winner. We got an empty-net goal at the end, too. How is practice going for your Christmas musical?"

"Pretty good. The performances are December 12th through 15th. I take it you'll come?"

"Yes. Our last game of the season is the 7th, then we're off until after New Year's, though we'll have morning workouts at the school gym between the last game and break. We start practicing on January 2nd and the playoffs start on January 11th. You're playing poker with us tonight, right?"

"Yes, I just have to make sure Maggie gets to the train."

"BNSF, right?"

"Yes."

"I can drive her to Union Station," Jesse offered. "That would save all the time it would take you guys to get to the city on the L or South Shore."

"That would be awesome," I said.

We finished in the shower, and after we each took individual showers, we headed to the coach house to play *Mario Kart*.

 Birgit

I arrived home about forty minutes before dinner, checked my email, and then brought up my diary.

Dear Diary!

I was interrupted last time, but I sure thought about the fantasy enough, and now I think I'll just tell you how it ended -- with my face and boobs sticky with cum, and with cum

leaking from my pussy and butt. I was cuddled with Dad and his face was sticky with pumpkin juices, and we were both breathing hard.

Unfortunately, that's not what really happened. It's not that I didn't like being with Kjell and Mikael, or that I haven't enjoyed being with Peter and Bob, but it should have been Dad. Ashley is right that I'd been dumb about it, and I wished I'd realized that if I'd kept it completely secret, it might actually have happened. But now that I've played the fantasy out in my mind, I have to set it aside because it will never happen.

I'm still unhappy about Peter and Julie deciding to be a couple, but that, too, is my own fault. I'm pretty sure Bob would be with Meghan soon, and I have a feeling he'll break things off with me, too. Well, not our photography, but our fucking. And that means I won't have anyone, because Philip is basically afraid of his own shadow in that regard.

If he doesn't get his shit together soon, I'll need to find someone else. I am a bit miffed at my aunts because they put their husbands off limits. I'd SO do it with Uncle Pete or Uncle Kurt, but Aunt Melanie and Aunt Kathy are sticks in the mud. There are a couple of single Navy guys, but their dumb UMCJ makes it a court martial offense to have sex with anyone under eighteen.

The guys on the hockey team are OK, but the only drool-worthy guy in my book is Lee, and he'd be far more likely to want to have sex with Jesse than with me. I wonder if Naomi's older brother might be interested. He's a Freshman at Northwestern and a hunk, but I haven't seen him since July because he's living on campus, and we don't go to Naomi's house very often, anyway.

I'm really looking forward to going to Sweden, where they aren't nearly so uptight and the age of consent is fifteen. I'll be with Kjell, for sure, and if Katt will allow it, let Mikhail take me around the world again, including a tit fuck! But if not, there will certainly be plenty of guys, both my age and older, who'll be interested. But that is eighteen months in the future.

I was interrupted by a knock at the door, so I saved the file, closed the program, and got up and opened the door.

"Will you help with dinner, Birgit-chan?" Yuriko asked.

"Sure," I agreed, and followed her to the kitchen.

 Jesse

I arrived home from driving Maggie to the train, and when I went up to my room, I saw Akiko was online. It was 8:00am on Saturday in Japan, which meant she'd just got out of bed.

MightyDuck: Hi!

安希子: Hi! What are you doing?

MightyDuck: It's almost time for dinner and then I'm playing poker with my dad and our friends!

安希子: I really miss you!

MightyDuck: I miss you, too!

安希子: I am happy you are visiting! Your mom and my mom spoke twice to confirm. Will your sister come here?

MightyDuck: No. She's going to visit Yuriko in Oguni.

安希子: My friends all want to meet you! How is hockey?

MightyDuck: We won our game today and we're still undefeated.

安希子: What else is going on?

MightyDuck: Not much except school. What about you?

安希子: The same.

MightyDuck: It's almost time for dinner.

安希子: Then I will let you go.

MightyDuck: Bye!

安希子: Bye!

I checked my email, but there was nothing except spam, which was in the spam folder, then went downstairs to have dinner with my moms before Guys' Night.



November 10, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I have what you asked for," Aunt Elyse said when she came up to my room on Sunday afternoon.

"Come in," I said. "You said you wanted to talk."

She closed the door, and we went to sit on the love seat.

"I want to tell you about what happened when I was fourteen," Aunt Elyse said.

"OK," I said, curious about what she might say.

"I don't think force is the right word. I had just turned fourteen and one of my friends had an older brother I thought was cute, named Sean. He had graduated from Live Oaks and was working in an auto shop in Glen Este. I flirted with him a bit and then we kissed. I liked it and I ended up at his apartment. We were making out, and I was super excited. I let him touch my boobs, and then he rubbed his finger between my legs. I'm pretty sensitive when I get excited, and I felt like I was exploding..."

"Been there, done that!" I giggled, interrupting her.

Elyse laughed, "I'm sure! And I'm sure you understand that at that point, I was willing to let him do whatever he wanted. He fucked me and I came hard again, and when he asked for a blowjob, I did it. Then he used his mouth on me and I

got so excited I didn't object when he put his dick in my butt. He didn't force me, he just had me so excited that I would do anything."

"That sounds like me and Mikael," I said.

"So you admit it!" Elyse said with a smile.

"Admit it? I'll give you all the details! I had my brains expertly fucked out!"

"Given he's married to Katt, I'd be shocked if it were otherwise!"

"Anyway, I saw Sean every chance I got, and we did all that stuff over and over again. Then he started buying me toys and eventually the ropes and blindfold. I didn't care because the orgasms were crushing. Not long after I turned fifteen, I went to his apartment to see him, and he had a girl I knew who had just finished seventh grade with him..."

"WHOA!" I gasped, interrupting her again. "She was barely thirteen, right?"

"Yes; I think her birthday was maybe two weeks before, and was barely developed."

"What did you do?"

"I left and never went back and he never called me or talked to me again. That was a couple of months before I met your dad."

"And had YOUR brains expertly fucked out!" I giggled.

"Perhaps," Elyse said with a smile. "But my cautionary tale is that it's possible to go overboard and to go past what you ought to do if you get too excited. I should never have done the things I did with Sean because it was abusive."

"But you liked it, right?"

"It felt good, but I wasn't ready for what happened. I was NOT the daughter of Steve and Kara Adams."

"Can I ask?"

"Tied up and triple penetrated, using a dildo and a vibrator. But it got worse. Your dad knows everything right up to this point, as well as the fact that I found Sean with a younger girl, but he doesn't know what happened in between. I'll tell you, but you can never tell anyone, ever."

"Why?" I asked. "I mean, you tell Dad everything and he tells you everything."

"Do you know about Josh Benton?" Elyse asked.

"Who is he?"

"He was called 'The Seven Hills Rapist' in Cincinnati. Bethany was his first victim. When your dad found out about it, he wanted to kill Josh Benton, but Bethany talked him out of it, so your dad arranged to have Josh Benton beaten up."

"Bonasera!" I giggled.

"Yes," Aunt Elyse said.

"Wow! Aunt Joyce's grandfather, right?"

"Yes, but you know you can't say anything to anyone, not even to your dad."

"I promise. And of course, I know the basic story with Aunt Bethany from her book, just not the guy's name. What happened to you?"

"The next time I was with Sean, which was between the triple penetration and the seventh grader, he blindfolded me, tied me up, and then invited two friends and they triple penetrated me, without asking if it was OK."

"WHOA!" I gasped. "That's rape!"

"Yes, it is, and that's why I didn't tell your dad. When I went back to Sean's house the next time, it was to tell him we were done, and that's when I found him with the new girl."

"You were afraid dad would kill him, like you said he tried to with the Josh Benton guy," I said. "And you still are."

"Yes."

"I don't think he would," I said. "He might beat him within an inch of his life, but dad wouldn't kill someone."

"And if YOU were raped?" Aunt Elyse asked. "What do you think he would do?"

"Good point," I said. "He'd kill the guy, cut off his dick and balls, and leave them in the guy's mouth to warn anyone else. If I didn't do it first!"

"Do you understand why I told you all of that?"

"Because you're afraid I might get out of control, or that the guy I'm with may try the things with a girl who isn't ready or maybe isn't even willing."

"That is what concerns me. But I also know you'll listen to me."

"I will," I said. "So, how do I use it?"

"You put on the harness, insert the dildo, apply plenty of lube, and go slowly and carefully, after you get complete informed consent, and you stop if asked to stop."

"I will," I said.

"Any plans to use it on a girl?" Aunt Elyse asked with a smirk.

"Plans? No. But maybe it happens. I've been with girls before."

"Of course you have! You are your mother's daughter!"

"I am!"

Aunt Elyse handed me the bag she'd brought with her and I opened it to find the harness and a dildo that was about the size of Bob's dick, which was basically average.

"Oh, please," I giggled. "I wanted one that was eight inches long and as big around as a beer can!"

Aunt Elyse laughed, "Well, I've never personally seen one that size and I bet you haven't, either! And your male friend would be VERY upset if you put something that size in his butt!"

"Probably. So, how big is..."

"NOT A CHANCE, you little scamp!" Aunt Elyse laughed. "You do NOT get details about your dad."

"You're just no fun!" I giggled.

"Something Penny says to your dad at least once a day!"



November 11, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Monday morning, I spoke to Ernie Lindberg at GlucoTech in Phoenix, Arizona, and after explaining who I was, arranged to visit their lab. I couldn't combine it with my trip to San Francisco, as I couldn't delay the visit until late in December, so we agreed I'd fly out the night of November 20th and spend the 21st with him and his team, joining them for dinner and flying home on the 22nd.

Once the call ended, I sent an email to Liesel at the travel agency, asking her to book the flights and a hotel for me. After that, I called Alderman Burnett's office and asked to speak to him. He was out, but the person who answered the phone promised he'd call back by the end of the day. Those things accomplished, I returned to my regularly scheduled coding work.

 Jesse

When I arrived home from school on Monday afternoon, I called Zahra, having decided the best approach was to meet her and explain the impediment we faced. She answered the phone on the second ring.

"It's Jesse," I said.

"Hi! Thanks for calling."

"Do you want to meet at Starbucks and get some hot chocolate?" I asked, figuring that was about the safest place we could meet.

"Sure! Now?"

"I can be there in about ten minutes."

"Me, too!"

We said 'goodbye', I put my coat and hat on, and then headed for Starbucks, where I saw Tabitha behind the counter. She waved, and I waved back, but I didn't get in line until Zahra arrived about a minute later. We greeted each other, got in line, and Tabitha took our orders for hot chocolate with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. Once I'd paid, we moved to the end of the bar and another employee made our drinks and put them on the counter, calling my name. Zahra and I took our cups of hot chocolate and went to sit at a table.

"I think I need to say that I'm Russian Orthodox," I said. "I know quite a bit about Islam, and it presents a huge problem."

"Because I wear a hijab?" she asked.

"Actually, more than half the girls and women at our church wear headscarves while they're in church, so I don't mind if you wear it. It's what it signifies, just as what my baptismal cross signifies."

"You mean because Muslims and Christians can't marry? I know, but I was hoping we could be friends."

"We can absolutely be friends," I agreed.

Zahra smiled, "Great!"

"Did Birgit tell you about our Friday night group?"

"Yes. I heard about them from Fangsu, too."

"If you follow the dietary rules, we always have at least one pizza with no meat, and of course if we go for Chinese, there are plenty of options that don't have pork."

"How do you know so much about Islam?"

"From Sunday School, and also some friends from Saudi Arabia, and some friends at school."

"Most Americans are ignorant about Islam."

"I know. Birgit told me what happened to you, too."

"So you know that except for my immediate family, only my husband is ever supposed to see my hair."

I nodded, "I understand that. What will your dad say about you spending time with our group?"

"He's not happy that I've chosen friends who are not from our mosque, but he doesn't interfere, so long as I behave properly."

"Were you born here?"

"Yes. Right after my parents emigrated from Palestine."

"What does your dad do?"

"He's a professor at the University of Chicago and teaches mechanical engineering. Your dad owns his own company, right?"

"Yes. Do you know about my family?"

Zahra laughed softly, "You mean that your dad lives as if he were a sheikh with a «ḥarīm»? I think my dad would be jealous if he knew, but my mom would never agree to him having junior wives!"

"But do you know about my actual situation?"

"What do you mean?"

"Birgit didn't tell you that I live with my two moms in a smaller house on the same property as my dad's house."

"Two moms?" she asked, looking confused. "Wait! You mean..."

I nodded, "Yes. It's a long, complicated story, but the short version is that my biological mom and my dad were never married, and my biological mom has a female partner, and they consider themselves married."

"Uhm, but your church...don't they object?"

"Nobody in my family except me goes to church, so they don't really care what the Church teaches. As for me, I worry about what I do, not what anyone else does. There are other areas where I disagree with what the Church teaches, too."

"If my dad found out about that, he'd probably forbid me from seeing you and Birgit."

"I don't know what to say other than you have to decide how to handle it."

"I'm not sure," Zahra said.

"I understand," I replied. "Next Friday we're going for Chinese and then we're going to see *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. You're welcome to join us."

"I'll let Birgit know if I'm going to be there," she said.

We finished our hot chocolate and left Starbucks. I offered to walk her home, but she didn't think it was a good idea for her mom to see her with me, so after saying 'goodbye' I walked home and went to the main house to see Birgit who was doing homework with Fangsu in the sunroom. I asked her to speak privately, and we went to the 'Indian' room.

"I just met Zahra at Starbucks," I said. "You probably should have told her about my moms."

"But Dad says we're supposed to be circumspect!" Birgit protested.

"Yes, but you know how conservative Muslims react to that. She laughed about Dad's «ḥarīm», but she was concerned how her dad would react if he found out about my moms."

"I'm not sure Zahra will care, because she likes you."

"I'm not sure that matters, given the situation. She's a conservative Muslim and I'm an Orthodox Christian. Things went badly with Adi and her family isn't conservative, and she didn't wear a hijab."

Birgit smirked, "If you ask Zahra to remove her hijab, she will!"

Which was the philosophical equivalent of stripping naked, at least from a traditionalist, conservative Islamic view of how women should behave.

"When I brought up the religious differences, she said she simply wanted to be friends."

Birgit rolled her eyes, "Even you can be clueless at times!"

"I don't think so," I replied. "She's nice, and I did invite her to join the group on Friday, but I'm not sure what she'll do. I just wanted to let you know what happened."

"I'll see her at school tomorrow," Birgit said. "What happened with Viktoria?"

"She can't deal with the Adams/Block/Clark family values."

"Your moms?"

"No. The sauna."

Birgit rolled her eyes, "People need to get a grip! And if you aren't seeing anyone, my friend Missy is interested in you."

"If she wants to talk to me, she knows where to find me!"

"I'll let her know. I need to finish my homework."

"OK."

She went back to the sunroom, and I headed back to the coach house.

 Steve

Late in the afternoon, just before I was about to leave to pick up Danielle, Alderman Burnett returned the call I'd placed to him that morning. I suggested that we have lunch later in the week at Takumi, and he accepted for Thursday. That accomplished, I packed up my things and left the office. Due to traffic, it took over an hour to get to Trinity, but I'd allowed enough time so that I was still five minutes early.

As I pulled up, I saw Danielle waiting, dressed in a long gray skirt and her red cape and hood over a white blouse. When I stopped, she hurried over to my BMW and climbed into the passenger seat.

"Hi!" she exclaimed. "Good girl enters; bad girl leaves!"

"Hi! Did you have dinner?"

"No. I assumed we'd eat together."

"Any preference?" I asked.

"I like pretty much everything, so anything you want. That goes for later, too, though I don't know what I like yet!"

I thought for a second, considered what we were wearing, then picked up my mobile phone and pressed a speed-dial button.

"Bucktown Bistro!" Sam answered.

"It's Steve Adams," I said. "Would you be able to squeeze in a table for two in about thirty minutes?"

"You don't ask for much!" Sam exclaimed. "But we just had a cancelation and I can give you that table."

"Sold! See you in thirty!"

She disconnected the call, and I snapped the phone shut, put the car in gear, and headed for Bucktown.

"Where are we going?" Danielle asked.

"A restaurant owned by a friend of mine," I said. "I'd say it's the best in the city, and put it up against the highest upscale places in the city, even though it's more casual."

"What kind of food?"

"For breakfast and lunch, traditional diner fare. For dinner, the menu varies from week to week, though they keep some of the most popular dishes on it more or less permanently. Alex, my friend, has been very helpful in creating dishes that fit within my diet, including specialized desserts."

"What actually is wrong? Neither Tabitha nor Talia knew."

"They're in good company because my doctors, including ones at the Mayo Clinic, don't know. Basically, my endocrine system, which regulates hormones, functions in an atypical manner, and complex carbohydrates exacerbate the symptoms. So long as I eat a ketogenic diet, that is, one that allows my body to burn fat in preference to sugars, exercise, and get enough sleep, I'm basically

symptom-free. That's why I avoid complex carbohydrates like bread, rice, and corn. And I get plenty of exercise from karate."

"What happens if you don't do those things?"

"I become manic and I'm susceptible to syncopal events, or fainting spells in layman's terms. Drugs called 'beta blockers' improve things, but they interfere with my programming work. On the plus side, one side effect of my abnormal endocrine system is a very high libido -- sex drive."

"So," Danielle smirked, "having three wives, two girlfriends, and permission to play around is medically necessary?"

"That's one way to look at it," I chuckled, "and it's not completely wrong, but it's more complicated than that. I suspect all the causes are interrelated, but in the end, this works for me, for my wives, and for my girlfriends."

"So you proposed to three girls at the same time?"

"No. As I said, it's complicated. Kara, who is the Senior Wife, is one of my three High School Sweethearts."

"Three?! Really?"

"Really. And that's complicated because one of them is lesbian, but we have a kid together. She's married, for all intents and purposes, to another woman."

"Whoa! It's crazier than I thought! Neither Elizabeth nor Tabitha knew that!"

"I don't think Elizabeth knows, but Tabitha certainly knows because she hung out with my eldest son and eldest daughter when she first came to Chicago. But she wouldn't have said anything unless it was necessary because we do our best

to be circumspect. Let's just say a large swath of society would object to the entire situation at the compound, which one of my friends labeled *Cirque du Steve*.

"Anyway, Kara, that's the Senior Wife, and I met when I was a Senior and she was a Junior, and due to numerous events, we had an off-and-on relationship. Over the course of that, Kara realized that she needed a very close female companion. There was a front-runner, but that crashed and burned for a host of reasons, and actually, as a result of a crash, we met Jessica, who is my legal wife, and wife number two.

"Going back to my time in High School, there were almost always three girls in my inner circle, so to speak. Almost always I was physically intimate with all three, but each served a different function, almost like the ego, super-ego, id model. At one point, there was even a formal Triumvirate. Anyway, after Kara, Jessica, and I married, and yes, we had a joint ceremony, we looked for a third person. That person wouldn't be a wife, but would fill one of the roles.

"There were a pair of girls who filled the role more or less permanently until they met the guy they wanted to marry. A few years ago, I met Suzanne, and she became the 'permanent third', agreeing she'd stay with me for life. Eventually, Kara, Jessica, and I decided to bring her into our marriage. And, yes, we all have sex together, with everything that implies."

"WHOA!" Danielle gasped. "That's..."

"Crazy?" I asked with a smile.

"Yeah. Just wow!"

"My friend was right on target when he called it a circus!"

"How did you even ask about having girlfriends?"

"Another long story, but my relationship with Kara in High School wasn't exclusive, for a number of reasons. When we met Jess, we simply told her, and other than imposing a pair of rules, she agreed. And, of course, Suzanne joined us knowing the score because she was a girlfriend."

"What rules, if I can ask."

"STI tests for anyone I wanted to be with, and religious use of birth control."

"Both Tabitha and Elizabeth said you had a vasectomy."

"I did, but that was obviously after all my kids were conceived. I have seven."

"Tabitha told me. That's crazy! Oh! Sorry!"

"Trust me; you are not the first or the last person who has or will call me crazy!"

"I think everyone at my church would have their heads explode if they knew all of this. Can I ask something?"

"Always. I'll answer if I can and tell you if I can't."

"How many girls have you been with?"

"North of two hundred. I don't keep an exact tally."

"Holy smokes!"

"Does that bother you?" I asked.

"No. I want to be bad, and that just enhances how bad I can be! I had an idea for just how bad after talking to Tabitha and Elizabeth."

"What's that?"

"My first kiss should be like Elizabeth's, but done the way you did with Tabitha -- take my virginity but shoot in my mouth, put yourself back inside me, then kiss me for the first time."

"As you wish!"

XLV. Bed Her Well!

November 11, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Quoting Wesley from *The Princess Bride*?" Danielle asked. "Didn't he mean 'I love you' when he said that?"

I chuckled, "I should have guessed you'd be filled in about 'Darmok'."

"Tabitha made a point of explaining how important that concept was. I hadn't seen the movie, so I watched it before I got in touch."

"I'm also going to guess she gave you a copy of *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*?"

"She did. And I also read the other book by the same author because a friend of mine was raped in High School."

"Doctor Bethany Krajick and I dated in High School and college, and I'm the 'friend'."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"Those two books should be mandatory reading for everyone," Danielle said. "Honestly, they opened my eyes and even if I wasn't going to be a bad girl, would have made my wedding night a LOT more fun than it might otherwise have been!"

"As I said the other evening, there are other ways than the one you've proposed."

"This is what I want," Danielle said firmly. "And I absolutely plan to tell Pastor Dwight, Robert, and my dad *everything*."

"You realize what might happen, right?"

"Yes. And even so, I want to experience 'raw, animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging, multi-orgasmic fucking!' That's how I want my first time."

"I was a bit blunt with her."

"Believe it or not, that's the first time I ever said the 'F' word."

"At the Compound, the 'F' word refers to 'fair', which is truly offensive the way it's often used! My kids can say 'fuck' and not get in trouble, but if they say 'not fair', they're likely to regret it."

"Why?"

"Because 'not fair' is almost always said by someone whining that they didn't get what they *felt* they deserved because they believe they're entitled."

"I'm curious, but what do you think about your kids having sex?"

"That it's up to them, so long as they follow those same two core rules -- religious use of birth control and mandatory STI tests."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen. She was twenty-three."

"Every boy's fantasy?"

"I hadn't even considered it until she propositioned me. I knew the basics, but I hadn't done anything other than a bit of making out."

"Which is more than I've done! I've never even danced."

"That doesn't surprise me in the least. May I suggest we dance naked before we go to bed? You can then confirm that slow dancing does, indeed, lead to sex!"

Danielle laughed, "A friend's dad jokes about Baptists not having sex standing up because it might lead to dancing."

"I've heard that one! I'm curious, do you intend to finish the semester?"

"Yes. Once the semester ends, I'm going to move in with Tabitha and John, and she's going to help me get a job at Starbucks. If you'll allow it, I want to join your Philosophy Club. Tabitha said she and John are going to start attending after New Year's."

That was news to me, as Tabitha had been attending the Hangout that Jesse and Birgit held. As I thought about it, it made sense if John wanted to attend, as he was so much older than the teens in that group, and was about ten years older than anyone in my group.

"They hadn't mentioned that to me," I said. "It's not a problem, and you're welcome, of course. I should have asked, merely for setting expectations, how you expected our relationship to evolve."

"You mean because Talia said she likely wouldn't ever see you again?"

"Yes."

"Unlike Tabitha, I don't think I'm going to fall in love with you, so I don't see that risk. Lust, on the other hand..."

"You'll happily take that risk?" I asked.

"Obviously! How about I say that I want to explore all the possibilities and leave it open?"

"That's fine. You do remember that staying tomorrow night requires permission, right?"

"You didn't ask?"

"I informed; the rule is that the girl has to ask."

"Do you know how weird it will be to ask a man's wife for permission to spend the night with him?"

"Wives," I chuckled.

"Yes, yes, you know what I meant!"

"Just fair warning, they like to tease, so take most of what they say with a metric ton of salt."

"Tabitha did warn me that no matter how crazy or silly I thought it might be that it would probably be both crazier and sillier."

"Just wait!" I chuckled. "You might encounter Her Royal Highness, the Empress of the Universe!"

"Birgit?" Danielle asked. "Tabitha warned me about her! Fourteen going on forty!"

"Pretty much."

"She said she knows adults who are less mature and less informed than Birgit and her brother Jesse."

"Me, too, unfortunately. You don't appear to suffer from that affliction."

"Thanks!"

When we arrived at Bucktown Bistro, I turned the car over to the valet, tipped him, and then Danielle and I went into the restaurant.

"Hi, Sam!" I said.

"Hi, Steve!" she exclaimed, hugging me and giving me a peck on the lips. "Who's your friend?"

"Samantha Saunders, meet Danielle Marlowe. Danielle, Sam."

They shook hands.

"Alex is preparing something special for you, but he didn't tell me what."

"You know I'll eat anything he prepares!"

"Follow me, please."

She led us to a table, and immediately a waiter came to take our drink orders.

"San Pellegrino with lime for me," I said. "Danielle?"

"Sprite, please."

The waiter quickly brought our drinks and Alex appeared at the table.

"Alex, my friend Danielle. Danielle, Alex Saunders, chef extraordinaire. You won't find a better chef in North America!"

"Go on!" Alex declared. "Don't stop on my account!"

"What more can I say than that?" I asked.

"The world? The universe?"

"I'll leave that to Michelin!"

"That's the *last* thing I need! Those stars are an albatros. Anyway, I have a tasting menu for you, if that's OK."

"As I said to Sam, I'll eat anything you prepare."

"Miss, do you have any allergies?"

"Only to hunger!" Danielle declared.

Alex laughed, "I like her! Then we'll begin with French onion soup encrusted with cheese. The croutons were made with almond flour, so they fit your carb budget, Steve."

"Something new?" I asked.

"I've been experimenting, and I've had people asking about the Atkins diet, which is a low-carb diet similar to your medically prescribed ketogenic diet. It helps with my diabetic customers as well. You know about William Banting, right?"

"Absolutely."

The waiter brought our onion soup, Alex excused himself to return to the kitchen, and Danielle and I began eating our small cups of French onion soup.

"This is really good," Danielle said. "What's a 'tasting menu'?"

"It'll be seven or eight courses, each one modest in size, with a variety of flavors, textures, and ingredients. It allows Alex to show off. The total amount of food would be equivalent to a regular meal, but served serially. Depending on what he has, there will be two or three meat courses, which could be beef, chicken, or fish, two or three vegetables, soup, and salad. And dessert will be something that fits my diet, often berries and low-carb ice cream. Given what he said about bread, I suspect he'll serve rolls or something similar made from almond flour."

"This is all new to me because my family's idea of 'fine dining' is Golden Corral."

"That's the buffet restaurant in the South, right?"

"Yes. We eat there when we visit my dad's parents in North Carolina. Otherwise it's White Fence Farm, Blueberry Hill, or Denny's."

"Were you allowed to go to movies?"

"PG only, but yes."

"Do your parents drink?"

"Oh, heavens no! We use grape juice at church for communion."

"Jesus turned water into wine," I said. "And the process to prevent grape juice from turning into wine wasn't invented until more than eighteen hundred years after Jesus lived. That's where Welch's got its start, and prior to that, every single church used wine if they had an Eucharistic service. And if you try to make the argument that the 'wine' Jesus made was non-alcoholic, the Bible itself rejects that when the point is made that you save the poor-quality wine for when everyone is drunk!"

"I bet you'd be fun in Sunday School!"

"Take your bible out of your shoulder bag and read Ezekiel 23:20."

"How do you know I have a bible in my bag?" Danielle asked.

"Is that a serious question?! I'll wager just about anything it's NIV, too."

Danielle laughed and took out a blue, leather-bound NIV Bible and flipped to Ezekiel.

"There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses."

"And translated into vernacular," I said with a grin, "'they were hung like donkeys and came like horses'. I bet your pastor doesn't preach THAT verse!"

"You'd win that bet!"

"I bet he doesn't preach about *Song of Solomon* chapter 7, either!"

"You'd win that bet, too!"

We finished our soup, and the waiter brought two small mixed-green salads with a lemon vinaigrette dressing.

"Round two as good as round one!" Danielle exclaimed a minute later.

"Remember that for later!" I said with a goofy smile.

Danielle laughed, "Cute."

Following the salad was the first meat course, which was a small steak medallion with mushroom sauce, which was followed by broccoli with cheese. After that, chicken with shallots in white wine sauce, followed by green beans with almonds. The final course was slices of five distinct cheeses and five small slices of almond-flour bread. Dessert was chocolate cake made with almond flour, with pecans and cherry ice cream.

"This cake and ice cream have no sugar and no carbohydrates?" Danielle asked.

"No sugar, but not zero carbs. The ice cream is made with a new sweetener called Stevia, and the cake is made with almond flour, which is low carb compared to regular flour, and the same sweetener. That's why I could eat the bread."

"How was everything?" Alex asked, coming up to the table.

"Danielle?" I prompted.

"Fantastic! Every course was amazing! And I can't believe the dessert had no sugar!"

"You can thank Steve for that! It was trying to accommodate him that led me to experiment."

"Awesome as always," I said to Alex.

"Thanks! Have a great evening!"

"You, too! And thanks for accommodating us."

"That's on Sam. You can thank her!"

He left, the waiter brought the check, and I handed him my Amex card without even looking at it.

"Add twenty-five percent for you and the busboys," I said.

"Thank you, Sir!"

He returned with the credit card slip for me to sign, and once I'd signed it, Danielle and I left to head home.

 Ashley

"What IS it with Dad?" Stephie grouched when we went up to our room after dinner.

"Is it really any of our business?" I asked. "I mean, seriously, does it hurt you in any way?"

"Why can't he just be satisfied with two wives?"

"Because he wanted three, and our moms agreed."

"And how many girlfriends does he need?"

"As many as he wants and as many as our moms think is OK. Dad doesn't tell YOU who to be friends with or what to do with them, does he?"

"I'm not having sex with every guy on the planet!" Stephie protested.

"And he's not having sex with every girl on the planet."

"He would if he could!"

I shook my head, "No, he wouldn't. You totally misunderstand him."

"And YOU understand him? You're eleven!"

"I think and I know things!" I declared. "I'm quiet, I watch, I listen, and I see. Dad calls Birgit the 'Neighborhood Watch', but she's an amateur!"

"So, Miss Smarty Pants, what do you understand that nobody else does?"

"Actually, everyone in the family understands except for YOU! We each get to decide for ourselves about sex. Dad, our moms, Suzanne, Natalie, Yuriko, and everyone else make their own decisions, within whatever agreement they have with each other. Kara Mom has the final say, and I hate to tell you, but she likes the idea of Dad having sex with virgins and wants to watch if she's allowed!"

"Just gross!" Stephie complained bitterly.

"And yet, she gets to decide what she likes just as you do, and just as I do. And yes, I'm only eleven, so I have no idea what I like or when I'll be ready. May I point out two things?"

"If you have to," Stephie said, sounding annoyed.

"First, you decided, a long time ago, that you were going to have sex with Nicholas and eventually marry him. Nobody objected, nobody told you 'no', and only because you decided to be a first-class bitch is that not possible."

"I don't want him!" Stephie growled.

"As Dad would say, 'Methinks she doth protest too much'. You do, but you don't want him to control HIS life. In that way, you're actually worse than Birgit! She wants to control everyone, but knows, deep down, she can't. You don't understand that, and if you don't learn, you're going to be very unhappy."

"Oh, shut up!" Stephie demanded.

"And the second thing," I said, continuing despite her demand to be quiet, "Kara Mom had Dad all to herself if she wanted. She *chose* not to. And that's a good thing, because otherwise Albert and I wouldn't be here! She *chose* to accept what Dad and Aunt Jennifer wanted, and that's a good thing, because otherwise Jesse wouldn't be here. And the same is true for Aunt Elyse and our other brothers!

"If *your* mom is OK with it, then what's the problem? Why do you think YOU get to decide? Life doesn't work that way. Our family doesn't like or tolerate control freaks for good reason! Most things aren't anyone's business, except the people involved. Why do you think we almost never see Grandma Adams? Because she's a first-class bitch and a control freak! Nobody else is like that -- Not Grandpa Adams, Grandpa Al, your Grandma Nancy, or anyone else."

"Just leave me alone!" Stephie demanded.

"No problem. But you go first! You leave Dad alone, let our moms decide what is and isn't OK, and chill!"

"Why should I listen to you? YOU think it would be OK for Dad and Birgit to fuck!"

I shook my head, "I actually don't, but not because I think it's gross or whatever, but because Birgit would be stupid about it. Well, mostly. There's another reason, but I can't say what it is."

"Right, because YOU know something nobody else does."

"Actually, I'd bet that our moms and Suzanne know, along with Aunt Jennifer and Aunt Elyse. And maybe a few other people. But I don't know for sure, so I can't say it out loud."

"Uh-huh."

"Believe what you want," I said. "But either way, Birgit was dumb about the whole thing. If she'd been quiet and kept what she wanted to herself, she might have been able to get it."

"And you'd be OK with that?!"

"What part of 'not my business' don't you understand? Has dad *ever* done anything to you to make you feel uncomfortable or threatened?"

"No," Stephie admitted.

"Then just let it go."

"I still say they did."

I shrugged, "I don't think so, but if they did, it's between them and our moms. Seriously, Steph, worry about yourself and what you want and what you do, not what anyone else does. Fix things with Nicholas, because otherwise you might lose him, and then you'll be unhappy for the rest of your life."

"What-ever!"

"Here endeth the lesson," I said in a silly voice that wasn't even close to Sean Connery, but made the point.

"Just stop!" Stephie growled.

"I'm going to go hang out with Natalie and Yuriko," I said.

I got up and left the room, and went downstairs to the sunroom where Natalie and Yuriko were doing homework.

 Jesse

"Go for Jesse!" I said, answering the call on my mobile phone from a number I didn't recognize.

"Hi, Jesse. It's Missy Underhill."

"Hi," I said.

"Would you like to get together sometime?"

"Sure. Can I ask why you haven't been out with us on Fridays since just before school started?"

"My parents divorced and I have to spend Friday and Saturday night with my dad."

"Where does he live?"

"Brookfield. They sold the house in Woodlawn when they divorced, and Mom and I live in an apartment by the hospital, where she works."

"Medical staff or administrative?"

"She's a nurse in cardiology."

"What does your dad do?"

"He's a cardiologist at Rush, well, now. He used to be at the hospital."

"What did you want to do?" I asked.

"Maybe get together after school? I could go out on Saturday evening if you could drive and pick me up, but I'd have to get permission from my dad and he's not happy I'm interested in boys."

"How about Wednesday? Brooke and I do homework together on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Sure! You're at the lab school, so where should we meet?"

"Starbucks OK?"

"Sure. I'll see you tomorrow."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, then went back to studying Spanish.

 Steve

"Danielle Marlowe, please meet Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne, my wives."

"Hi!" Danielle exclaimed.

"Hi, Danielle," Kara said. "We have it from here, Snuggle Bear!"

I chuckled, "I'll be in my study."

I left the 'Indian' room and went next door to my study, turned on my 17" iMac G4, and brought up my journal. I hadn't updated it since I'd been with Talia, and figured the twenty to thirty minutes my wives would spend 'interrogating' Danielle would be best used by bringing it up to date. My time estimate was spot on, as about twenty-five minutes later, Kara brought Danielle to my study, then left, closing the door behind her.

"How did it go?" I asked, nodding towards one of the wingback chairs.

"You could have warned me!" Danielle exclaimed as she sat down.

I chuckled, "I did! I said they like to tease and that you should take most of what they say with a metric ton of salt. Mind telling me?"

"At first it seemed as if they were upset or unhappy, which didn't make any sense, and it almost seemed like what I imagine a KGB interrogation would be like."

"I have a friend who is ex-KGB," I chuckled. "So maybe they asked for some pointers!"

"Ex-KGB?"

"Yes. And another one who is a former General Colonel who commanded a Russian Tank Division. Not to mention another who is a diplomat and later became a member of the Duma, their parliament. Another is a former diplomat."

"That sounds like an interesting story..."

"Pillow talk for later."

"Once I didn't wilt under withering fire, it got silly, and then downright weird!"

I chuckled, "Knowing my wives, I can guess, but tell me."

"Kara actually asked if she could *watch!* She was teasing, right?"

"Nope. She was not. She's watched in the past, and had sex with me in front of a pair of newly deflowered virgins."

"Can this get any stranger?!" Danielle asked.

"Don't ask that question in this house, because the answer is most definitely 'yes!'"

"And your other wives? They're OK with that?"

"That happened before Suzanne was a wife," I replied. "But the answer is 'yes', they're OK with that."

"Weird."

"Get used to saying either that or 'strange'. We are unconventional here, and don't conform to any social norms. If it's more than you bargained for, just say so."

"No. Tabitha was pretty clear that your family is very different. But I don't think she knows about what you just told me."

"She doesn't. The only reason I shared that with you is because of your reaction. Please keep it to yourself."

"I simply assumed anything we spoke about was private unless you gave permission to share. Nobody will know I was with you except Tabitha and Talia. I won't tell my dad, pastor, or Robert who did the dirty deed!"

"What was my wives' answer about tomorrow night?"

"That was when Kara teased -- well, I thought she was teasing -- about watching. That was the one time she was a bit flustered, and Suzanne quickly said it wasn't a condition. That was when Jessica said I should ask you about your toys!"

I chuckled, "Of course she did. My wives are all troublemakers!"

"They were mentioned in the book, though only vibrators received more than a passing mention."

"Remember, the target audience is kids thirteen to nineteen who have little or no actual experience with sex. Bethany's goal was to provide them information to make informed decisions about sex, as well as provide what amounts to an instruction manual for what might be termed 'conventional' activities, while mentioning that there are other things that people do, all of which are OK, so long as both partners consent."

"I don't think my dad would agree!"

"Sadly, most parents wouldn't agree, which is, in fact, why the book was originally written."

"You know my curiosity is piqued, right?"

"Yes, and my advice to you is to save those things for the future. If you're curious, that's something we can explore together at some point. Ask me sometime after Wednesday morning if you're still interested and still want to be with me."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Who knows? Everyone is different, everyone has different needs and desires. And nobody can commit to sex irrevocably. You can always say 'no', literally during the act, and we'll stop."

"At some point, though, haven't you basically committed?"

"It depends on what you mean. If you consent to doing something, then we'll do it, but that doesn't mean you can't say 'stop' for any reason at all. Maybe whatever we're doing is uncomfortable, or you decide you don't like it, or whatever. You say 'stop' and we'll stop and talk about it, and decide if we should stop completely or do something different."

"Contrary to what most people seem to think, a marriage certificate is not a license to have sex without worrying about consent. Some people think there's such a thing as implied consent, and while I understand the argument, I don't agree with it. You've told me what you want for your first time, but beyond that, you have to ask, or I'll ask."

"Elizabeth advised me to answer your question the same way she did -- After the first time, I want you to ravish me however you want, in any way you want, for tonight, tomorrow, and tomorrow night, with no limits. And, yes, I know exactly what I'm asking for."

"So long as you understand, you can change your mind at any point."

"I do! I'm ready to become a very, very bad girl!"

"And I'm more than happy to make that happen!"

"Can I ask one more question?"

"Always."

"Does Kara watching excite you?"

"I think it's better to say that I derive pleasure from giving pleasure, and that is something from which Kara derives extreme pleasure. I've always focused on giving the maximum amount of pleasure possible, and that's what fulfills my needs. Or, to put it another way, it's fairly easy for guys to orgasm, but fulfillment is more than that. Are you actually considering it, or was that just a curiosity question?"

"Remember, I thought she was teasing until you disabused me of that idea..."

"Nice vocabulary!" I said, interrupting her. "I'd use that word, but most people wouldn't."

"I'm not just another pretty face and sexy body!" Danielle declared.

"Which was my point! I like smart girls."

"PhD in chemistry, medical doctor, and future lawyer? I'd say! What about your girlfriends?"

"Natalie will have a degree in Russian history with a minor in foreign relations, and she'll earn her Master's and PhD in Russian history at «Европейский университет в Санкт-Петербурге» -- the European University at Saint Petersburg. Yuriko is working on an undergraduate degree in horticulture and will earn her Master's as well, before she returns to Japan. And to complete the picture, the mother of two of my boys has a Master's in Finance, and my eldest son's moms both have Master's in engineering."

"Yours is in computer science?"

"Undergrad only. There was no point in going beyond that. But I derailed your train of thought."

"Well," Danielle smirked, "that would make it very, very, VERY bad! Using words I haven't used before, except one of them once -- 'Dad, Robert, Pastor Dwight, not only did I beg him to fuck me, but I sucked his dick, swallowed his cum, let him cum on my face, let him put it in my butt, AND I let his *wife* watch!'"

I laughed, "I think you might cause those 'gentlemen' to have a stroke!"

"That is actually an argument for doing it! What's your opinion?"

"I have to stay neutral," I said. "No pressure, and it won't change anything one way or the other from my perspective. You have to decide if that's something you can do, and if so, do you want to, and if you want to, for how long, and if you want to watch Kara and me."

"A demonstration?" Danielle asked.

"It could either be a 'preview of coming attractions' or simply fulfilling Kara's fantasy after the fact."

"She likes to be watched?"

"She's both voyeuristic and exhibitionist. Did Kara or anyone else mention that she was a 'good girl' when I met her?"

"No! That's true?"

"Yes. She attended a fundamentalist evangelical church in Milford, Ohio, and sought out the class stud for a torrid affair. It didn't turn out that way, though, and instead of fucking, we made love and you see the end result."

"So you're saying that after I'm with you, I'm going to have sex with a girl?"
Danielle asked with a smirk.

"My answer to that question has to be that you should do what you want to do, not what someone else wants you to do, and you shouldn't be bound by any limits except those you impose on yourself for your own reasons. Maybe you experiment, maybe you don't. I'd bet on you not doing that, but that's just a feeling, not an attempt to influence or control you."

"Is it OK to ask about your limits?"

"Sure. My agreement with my wives is that I won't be with anyone from UofC or UofC Hospital, or any of their friends. It's possible for them to grant an exception, but I haven't asked for one and don't expect to. I also can't, for what I think are obvious reasons, be with anyone who works for my company, nor hire anyone who I've been with, though there have been exceptions at times in very

specific circumstances, mostly around hiring someone I'd been with long before. I also won't be with someone who is in a relationship..."

"Hang on! You're married!" Danielle interrupted.

"Yes, and what I was going to say is that an exception can be made if the girl's partner is fully supportive. And I don't mean passively tolerating it, I mean giving affirmative consent. And yes, I've asked in at least one instance when a married woman came on to me."

"So if I had a boyfriend, you'd refuse?"

"Generally speaking, yes, because no matter what you said, I couldn't be confident I wasn't messing up the relationship. I don't condone cheating and won't participate in cheating. The married woman I mentioned before had an open marriage, and when I spoke to her husband by phone, he was with his girlfriend."

"Things I never had a clue about!"

"Hang around here and you'll hear a lot more! That's especially true if you decide to come to the Philosophy Club meetings. It's up to you -- tell me what you want to do."

"I want you to strip me naked, fuck me hard, cum in mouth, then kiss me. Then do everything you did with either Tabitha or Talia!" She stopped, took a deep breath, then said, "And Kara can watch us after you demonstrate what you're going to do with me."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," Danielle said firmly.

I got up, took Danielle's hand, and led her from the study, encountering Ashley as we walked out the door.

"Bed her well, Dad!" Ashley smirked, then scampered away.

"How old is she?!" Danielle asked.

"Eleven. That's Ashley, and she's the truly dangerous one!"

"Was she waiting for us to come out of your study?"

"I'd lay money on it!" I chuckled. "You did ask if it could get weirder! It just did!"

"Me and my big mouth!"

"I hope so!" I said in a low, sexy voice.

"I may be a goody two-shoes, but I know that every single boy on the planet dreams of that!"

"Pretty much," I replied as we stepped into the 'Indian' room.

"Kara, Danielle has a request," I said.

"I win!" Jessica declared happily. "Told you!"

"You don't even know what she's going to ask!" I countered.

"Oh, please!" Jessica exclaimed. "She already has permission to have her brains fucked out for the next thirty-six hours! She could only be asking for one thing!"

"Ignore her!" Kara said, her eyes burning with desire for the question she knew was coming. "What's your question?"

"Would you like to demonstrate, then watch?"

"YES!" Kara responded hungrily. "Oh, yes!"

"What did you win, Jess?"

"Kara is my body slave for the next thirty-six hours!"

"And if she had won?"

"She had to wear ME out!" Kara smirked.

"Yeah, good luck with anyone doing that," I chuckled.

"OK, she would have had to try to wear me out!"

"You're right, Steve," Danielle said. "It could get weirder!"

"Never, ever ask 'could it be any weirder' in this house!" Suzanne advised.

"Because the minute you say that, Loki will ensure it does!"

"Whose daughter is the cute blonde eleven-year-old?" Danielle asked.

"Ours," Jessica said, putting her arm around Kara. "But my biological daughter, why?"

"When we came out of Steve's study, she smirked and said 'bed her well!'"

My wives all broke up laughing at our precocious eleven-year-old's antics. She was not just giving Birgit a run for her money, but outclassing her in many ways. And the frightening part was that Ashley was far more circumspect and quiet, so nobody would ever know exactly what she was thinking or planning. Birgit, on the other hand, was completely transparent, which had worked, at least in her mind, to her disadvantage.

"As I said!" Suzanne declared.

"Shall we?" I asked.

Kara hugged and kissed both Jessica and Suzanne, making a point of giving each of them a sexy French kiss, before she followed Danielle and me out of the room. We encountered a scowling Stephie who was coming down the stairs. I knew my middle daughter didn't approve, but that was a concern for later. Kara, Danielle, and I made our way to what Kara called 'the Playroom', with me closing and locking the door to the kitchen behind us.

We went into the bedroom and the first thing I did was remove the tapestry that covered the mirrors over the bed, then turned to Danielle.

"Tell Kara specifically what you want, please," I said.

"I told Steve that I want my first kiss to be very, very bad. He should fuck me hard, cum in my mouth, then put himself inside me before he kisses me the first time. Then, he should fuck my brains out for the next thirty-six hours in every way possible, and I want you to watch. But before that, you demonstrate what my first time will be like."

"Then Steve should get his clothes off!" Kara exclaimed as she began disrobing.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Michael

"What are you doing?" I asked as Andi put her arms on my shoulders and leaned forward against me.

"Reading the same document you are!" she exclaimed.

"Do you have to lean on me?" I asked.

"Chill, Mike!" she replied. "I want to read the rules for the contest."

Mr. Perez had sent an email with the details of the upcoming robotics competition, and Andi didn't have her own email and her dad wasn't home to give it to her, so she'd come over to read it. This wasn't the first time she'd pressed against me or hugged me or whatever, and it was pretty obvious she wanted to be my girlfriend, but I was more interested in robots. Matt said that would change, and I was sure he was right.

"Stack ten blocks on top of each other, in numerical order," I read. "Then take them down in reverse numerical order."

"At least they didn't make it like *Jenga*!" Andi said. "And I see the specs on the blocks are not biggest to smallest, which means balancing."

"Navigate a seventy-five meter obstacle course with gates and barriers controlled by levers," I read.

"We're going to need to make the arm articulate," Andi said. "They don't have a course diagram here, but I bet the levers will be on different sides and at different heights. So in addition to joints, it'll need to be extendable as well."

"The diagram is in the other attachment," I said, opening it.

The diagram showed levers at floor level and as high as three feet, but there was also a tunnel that was only eighteen inches high, which meant the arm would have to be retractable and fold almost flat against the robot.

"And you're correct," I observed.

"Of course I am!" Andi declared. "Girls are always right!"

I rolled my eyes even though she couldn't see, "Now you sound like my sisters!"

"I bet they don't want to kiss you!" Andi said quietly.

There. Now she'd said it and I had no idea what to say. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but kissing would lead to other stuff and I...well, the best thing I could do was let it go.

"The final part of the competition is a two-hundred meter dash, a hundred forward and a hundred in reverse."

"Speed, agility, stability, and a retractable, articulate arm with a precision grip," Andi said. "We better get designing!"

"I think the base of our battlebot would work," I said. "It's low enough to go through the tunnel even with an arm retracted on top. We'd need to change out the top case, obviously."

"And our motors for the wheels are just fine because we have four independent motors and we just reverse the current to go backwards. But we're going to need better batteries."

"Probably. We'll discuss it all at Robotics Club tomorrow," I said. "Should we play *Age of Empires*?"

"I'll kick your butt!" Andi declared.

She sat down at the other computer and we started up the game. I was glad she'd dropped the bit about kissing. I probably would, someday, but not yet.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Stephe

"What's bugging you?" Natalie asked when I walked into the sunroom.

"Nothing!" I growled.

"That's obviously not true."

"She's upset with dad because he has a dalliance!" Birgit said.

"Do you want to talk, Stephe?" Natalie asked.

"Why?" I asked. "It won't do any good! He's not going to stop!"

"Why does it bother you?" Birgit asked.

"It just does!" I declared. "He has three wives and two girlfriends! He doesn't need more!"

"If you're afraid he's going to be with your friends, that's not true," Ashley said.

"Right," I growled, "because he's not going to say 'yes' to any girl who asks?"

"Not true!" Birgit protested. "Ask Jesse about that. Or me, actually, because he has never once flirted with any of our friends. Do some of them want him? Sure! But that's on *them* not on him. If you don't want your friends to flirt with him, tell them! Dad would never do anything that would hurt you."

"Uh huh," I said, not buying it.

"How does your dad having a dalliance harm you?" Natalie asked.

"It just does!" I growled. "He shouldn't!"

"Because you say so?" Ashley asked. "Who died and made you boss? Leave the delusions about the world bowing down and kissing your feet to Birgit!"

"Hey!" Brigit protested.

"Deny that, if you dare, Birgit-chan!" Yuriko teased.

"What-ever!" Brigit exclaimed.

"Nobody says you have to like it, Steph," Ashley said. "But you do have to accept that it's the way it is."

"Ashley is giving you good advice," Natalie said.

"I saw dad with the pretty, stacked girl and said 'bed her well!'" Ashely giggled.

Birgit, Ashley, Yuriko, and Natalie all laughed, but I couldn't take it anymore, so I left the sunroom and hurried upstairs to my room where I shut the door. There was a knock two minutes later, which meant it wasn't Ashley.

"GO AWAY!" I exclaimed.

"Can we talk, please?" Suzanne asked. "Please?"

"Just leave me alone!" I growled. "GO!"

Thankfully, I heard footsteps as she walked away. I was not happy because everyone was against me, even though I was right! Birgit WANTED her friends to have sex with Dad and Ashley was ENCOURAGING him, which I just didn't understand. Worse, Birgit wanted to have sex with him, which was just gross. She might have actually done it on her birthday, even though Ashley didn't think so.

It was early enough that I could go out, so I called Shauna, who lived just down the street, to see if she was home. She was, and she said she was happy for me to come over and hang out. I went downstairs, put on my coat, hat, and gloves, told my mom the doctor I was going to Shauna's and left the house.

XLVI. You're Free

November 11, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

Kara was naked in a flash, her clothing seemingly simply flying off her gorgeous body. At thirty-eight, she looked even sexier than she had as a teenager. There wasn't an ounce of fat on her body, which I knew from regular thorough explorations. I undressed more slowly, as I would, from everything I understood, be the first naked man Danielle had ever seen. She was going to see me at full mast, something that no red-blooded male could avoid seeing Kara naked, or clothed, for that matter, if what I'd heard about her male students was true.

"What are we doing?" Kara asked, as I stepped out of my briefs.

"Danielle?" I prompted.

"Raw, animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging, multi-orgasmic fucking, with the first kiss while he's fucking you after he cums in your mouth."

"That's what you want?" Kara asked, giddily.

"Yes! My first kiss will be after he fucks me and cums in my mouth and puts himself back inside to fuck me while we kiss."

"No foreplay?" Kara asked.

"No!" Danielle said. "I don't want to do anything before he's inside me. He can ravish me in every way afterwards!"

"You'll need lube with her, Snuggle Bear."

"Not with you!" I chuckled.

Kara laughed softly, got into the bed, lay on her back and spread her legs wide, offering me her glistening labia. Contrary to my statement, I chose to use the cherry lube to ensure I could slide in completely with one thrust. I retrieved the tube from the drawer, applied it, then climbed into bed and moved between her legs. I rubbed my glans along her labia, positioned it, then thrust forward hard, burying myself in my wife's silky tunnel.

I lowered myself completely onto Kara, she wrapped her arms and legs around me, and we began fucking hard and fast. Kara and I had such intimate knowledge of each other's bodies that we fell into a practiced rhythm that provided her with intense stimulation, resulting in a series of strong orgasms but didn't push me too quickly towards my release.

About twelve minutes later, sweaty and breathing hard, I pulled out, moved up, Kara parted her lips, and I began slowly sliding in and out of her mouth. Kara sucked and lashed my tongue, and about a minute later, I groaned and cum spurting into her mouth. After the last pulse, I moved to push back into her pussy, began fucking her again, then lowered my mouth to Kara's for a deep French kiss.

I brought her off once more, then pulled out, moved down, and used my tongue to give her a final orgasm. When her orgasm had passed, I moved up, and we shared a soft, loving kiss, then I propped myself on some pillows and Kara moved to snuggle against me with her head on my chest. Nothing was said for a couple of minutes, then Kara sat up.

"I think you're wearing too many clothes!" she said to Danielle.

"I have a request," I said.

"What's that?" Danielle asked as she started to pull her sweater over her head.

"I want you to wear your cape and hood."

Danielle laughed, "So that the Big Bad Wolf can devour Little Red Riding Hood?"

"Yes."

She smiled and nodded, "I'll be right back. It's in your study."

"OK."

She left the room, and I heard her exit the door to the kitchen and pull it shut behind her.

"Happy about your fantasy?" I asked.

"What do you think?!" Kara asked giddily. "You know how hot this makes me!"

"I do."

"Now, if we could only find a way to make Abbie's movie!"

I chuckled, "You know the problem with that."

"Not finding twelve virgins! That's the easy part!"

"You know, you're probably right!" I chuckled. "But the movie could create all manner of problems."

"Then I'll just have to find another pair of girls like Dayna and Stefana!"

"Just don't go crazy, please."

 Jesse

"Jesse, you have a visitor," Mom One called up the stairs.

"Be right down," I said, wondering who it might be.

I got up from my desk where I was doing homework and went downstairs to see who had come to the coach house.

"Hi, Jesse," Francesca said. "Could we talk?"

She'd been coming to our Friday night groups about half the time since mid-September, but had rarely spoken to me, though she'd been cordial. I'd been a bit surprised by that, but given I was not interested in any kind of exclusive arrangement, I was happy she hadn't pressed the issue. I wondered, now, if she'd just been biding her time.

I still had feelings for her, but they were nothing like what they'd been, and there was no way I was going to mess things up with Scarlett or Larisa, or do anything that would cause problems when I traveled to Japan to see Akiko. I had an odd feeling that one of those three girls would be the one I married, but that was something to worry about far into the future. One thing I didn't see was a future with Francesca.

"Let's go down to the Duck's Nest," I said. "Do you need something to drink?"

"No, thanks."

I led Francesca downstairs, put on *Chicago 19*, and then sat down next to her on the sofa.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You aren't dating anyone seriously, right?"

"No," I said warily. "I don't think it makes sense because in about twenty months I'll be going to college, most likely out of state."

"You still like me, right?"

"As a friend," I replied.

"Could we do something together sometime?"

I felt she was trying to get back together, and if I did stuff with her, just the two of us, it would only encourage her to think we'd get back together.

"May I be totally honest with you?"

"Yes."

"I don't think things can go back to the way they were. You can blame your mom or Fate or Loki or even me if you want, but with everything that happened, I just don't feel the same way about you as I did."

"I know," Francesca said. "But I miss spending time with you, even if it's just as friends. And I miss...the other stuff we used to do."

"The 'other stuff' isn't a good idea," I replied. "I think it would give you the wrong idea."

"But you liked doing it with me and you do it with lots of other girls."

"It's a bad idea," I replied.

"You won't even try?"

"I'll be your friend, Francesca, but that's all."

She stood up, looked as if she was going to say something, but instead, she simply turned and walked quietly up the stairs. I waited until I heard the outside door, then went upstairs to the living room where my moms were cuddled on the couch.

"She looked unhappy," Mom Two said.

"She's trying to find a way for us to get back together. She's been hanging out with us some Friday nights, and now she wants to do things together. But I'm afraid she'd get the wrong idea."

"You know we don't interfere," Mom One said. "But we think that's for the best."

"Thanks, Moms. I have more homework, and then I'm going to bed."

"Good night," both moms said.

 Steve

Danielle returned with her red cape, and stood at the end of the bed, and slowly undressed, first revealing her large, firm breasts, which would make it possible to ravish her in a way that wasn't possible with Steve-type girls. The last thing to go was her light blue panties, revealing a tangle of blonde pubic hair and plump labia.

"You look good enough to eat!" I declared.

"And I want to be eaten!" Danielle declared.

"I know it goes slightly against what you requested," I said. "But a bit of mutual foreplay would help."

"I think you'll find I'm dripping!" Danielle exclaimed. "How long before you can go again?"

"Soon," I replied. "But it usually takes a bit of kissing or other activity to get me hard after the first time."

"Want to add to your bad girl idea?" Kara asked with a smirk.

"I did say 'very, very bad!'" Danielle declared.

"It could be 'very, very, very'," Kara said impishly.

"How?"

"Sixty-nine with Steve to get him hard, but without him washing first so you can taste me, then, when he cums, don't swallow before you kiss him, and, to add another 'very', have him put it in your butt before your first kiss."

"Kara..." I said gently.

"She's free to choose what she does!" Kara insisted. "I was just making a suggestion that she give up all her cherries before she has her first kiss!"

"And that's OK?" Danielle asked. "I mean, not swallowing first?"

"If that's what you want, then the answer is unequivocally 'yes'," I replied.

"What you said before about pleasing your partner, right?"

"Yes. But you have to be sure. What you initially asked for was pretty extreme for someone with no experience, and this is even more extreme. I'm not saying 'no', nor am I trying to discourage you. I just want to make sure it's what you really want."

Danielle laughed softly, then said, "Well, that allows me to announce it as - 'Dad, Robert, Pastor Dwight, I watched the guy fuck his wife, and right after that, I sucked his dick without him washing while he licked my pussy. I begged him to fuck me really, really hard, which he did, but had him cum in my mouth. Then he put it in my butt before I had my first kiss, after which I swallowed his cum, all with his wife watching! Later, I let him cum on my face, in my butt, and in my mouth, and we fucked for two days straight!'"

"They're going to have a stroke," I chuckled. "And you seem to be enjoying your new vocabulary!"

"I bet I enjoy doing it more than talking about it!"

"Then come become a bad girl!" Kara exclaimed, getting out of the bed.

Danielle put on her cape, pulled the hood over her head, and moved over to the bed.

"Those ruby lips of yours should have him rock hard inside of a minute!" Kara declared.

Danielle had not shown even a tiny bit of hesitancy or nervousness, and climbed into bed next to me with no hesitation at all. I moved so that I was flat on my back with my head on the mattress rather than the pillow, and Danielle quickly moved to straddle my face with her head at my groin. I put my hands on her firm butt cheeks and gently pulled her down so that her labia, which were slick with her juices, touched my lips.

I licked gently, enjoying her musky juices, but didn't want to penetrate her with my tongue. As I ran my tongue over her engorged labia, I felt Danielle take hold of my semi-erect member and a few seconds later, my glans was engulfed in her soft, wet mouth. A few swirls of her tongue and a few tentative sucks were all it took for me to become rock hard, and as I had expected, she quickly moved off me and lay on her back with her legs spread.

I grabbed the tube of lubricant, squirted some on my palm, then liberally coated my shaft and glans before moving between Danielle's legs. I looked into her eyes and rubbed my glans along her slick labia.

"Fuck me!" she begged. "I want it! I need it!"

I nodded, positioned myself at her entrance, pushed forward just enough to part her labia, then entered her with a powerful thrust, burying myself in her tight, slick tunnel.

"Ungh!" Danielle grunted, panting.

"You OK?" I asked.

Danielle responded by putting her arms around me and pulling my body against hers, wrapping her legs tightly around me, and pushing her hips upward.

"Fuck me," she grunted. "Fuck me hard!"

Not wanting to disappoint, I did exactly as she requested. After four powerful thrusts, each one causing her to grunt, Danielle began moving with me, undulating her hips as I moved in and out of her, grunting as I pounded her hard. Just two minutes into our animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging fucking, Danielle groaned, her body shook, and her pussy spasmed hard as she had her first orgasm.

We fucked hard through her orgasm, and a second one followed soon after. Danielle showed no signs of wanting to stop, and my energetic time with Kara ensured that I wasn't even close, despite the extremely pleasurable feeling of the spasms of Danielle's tight pussy around my dick. We continued until she had a third orgasm, then I pulled out.

Danielle was breathing hard, and I decided to add one additional thing before our first kiss. I grabbed the lube, spread some on the sides of her breasts, then lodged my shaft between them. I directed Danielle's hands to her breasts and had her push them together, and I began sliding forward and back.

"The first spurt will be on your face," I said, "then in your mouth."

"OK," she panted.

I allowed my pleasure to build, not fighting against the rising pressure, until after about two minutes, I groaned as the first jet of cum spurted onto Danielle's lips and chin. I quickly moved up, pressing my glans into her open mouth, thrusting slowly as strong jets of cum coated her swirling tongue. The pleasure

was intense, and I really didn't want to stop after my orgasm had passed, but there were three more things to do.

I withdrew from Danielle's mouth, moved down, and proceeded to 'eat' Little Red Riding Hood to orgasm, then grabbed the lube. I liberally coated my shaft and glans and rubbed some between her butt cheeks. I helped her put her legs on my shoulders, positioned myself against her rear entrance, and applied pressure until I popped into her tight butt.

"Ungh!" Danielle groaned. "Ungh!"

I waited for about twenty seconds, then used three short but firm strokes to bury myself in her rear. I lowered her legs, then leaned forward. Danielle raised herself up a bit, our lips met, then our tongues, and we shared a searing French kiss with her mouth full of my cum and my dick embedded in her butt. We kissed for a good three minutes before I broke the kiss and gently pulled out.

"We need to shower," I said.

Danielle nodded, and I took her hand, helping her from the bed, seeing Kara for the first time since Danielle had climbed into the bed. I wasn't surprised to see her in the final throes of ecstasy as she diddled herself with her fingers. I was tempted to kiss her to give her a taste, but felt that would cross a line that my other wives wouldn't accept. I led Danielle to the shower and once the spray was the right temperature, I took off her cape, hung it on a hook, and we moved under it.

"Did that meet your needs?" I asked as I began soaping her body.

Danielle laughed softly, "Even better, because you moved the 'cum on my face' part to before the kiss, you did it between my boobs, AND you licked me to orgasm before, too!"

"And everything feels OK?"

"Nothing hurts, but my butt sure feels strange!"

"You have about thirty-six hours, and I can most likely have another eight or so erections in that timeframe, with some rest periods. And, of course, I have my mouth which isn't limited that way. What would you like to do?"

"Fuck!" she exclaimed. "Well, all the other stuff, too!"

"Obviously, but I want to know what you want."

"To be ravished! Everything we did is OK, and we could just repeat that over and over, but I do want to feel you cum in my pussy."

I finished lathering Danielle's body, then handed her the soap, advising her to ensure I was thoroughly clean because I'd been in her butt. She did that, and I enjoyed the feeling of her soft, sudsy hands. When she finished lathering me, we both rinsed off, then got out of the shower. We dried off, then went back to the bedroom.

"What happened to Kara?" Danielle asked.

I chuckled, "I'd put money on her dragging our wives to bed!"

"They all do that with each other?"

I nodded, "They do."

"I'm not sure I could do that, though I was totally turned on by sucking you after you had been with her."

"As one of my lovers once said, it's different tasting it that way than getting it directly from the source."

"I can see that!"

"What would you like to do next?"

"You decide! Seriously! What's your favorite thing to do?"

"Let me show you..."

 Birgit

"I wish I had boobs like the girl dad is with!" I declared.

"Has any boy complained?" Ashley asked, then smirked, "Or girl?"

"That's not the point!"

"You know what Dad likes! I figured that would be your ideal!"

"What-ever!" I huffed.

Ashley laughed, "You're so easy to wind up, Birgit!"

"What do you think Dad is doing right now?"

"Duh!" Ashley giggled. "When he walked by me I said 'Bed her well!' and the girl heard it."

I wanted to say that it should have been *me*, but one thing I'd learned from what had happened, or really, had not happened, with Dad, and from Ashley, was that I needed to keep my mouth shut about some things.

"I need someone to bed ME well!" I declared.

"Bob?"

"He's fun, but I think he's going to be a couple with his friend Meghan. And Philip is so naïve and inexperienced that I'm not sure he's *ever* going to get laid."

Ashley rolled her eyes, "Oh, please! You said he wants to, but he's worried because you're fourteen."

"Maybe I should try one of Jesse's friends. Or Matthew's."

"May I point out the obvious?"

"What's that?" I asked.

"That if you had asked Peter to be your boyfriend, he'd basically have moved into your room and you could have slept with him every night! Aunt Julia would totally be OK with it, even if Uncle Dave is a bit more conservative."

"Church brainwashing!" I declared.

"Right, because Jesse is a monk," Ashley giggled. "And Peter refused you."

"I don't want to be tied down."

"Then you better think twice about Philip, because if you do get him into bed, he's going to expect you to be his girlfriend."

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"It fits, doesn't it?"

"How do you figure out so much stuff?"

"I'm quiet, I pay attention, and most importantly, I think and I know things!"

"Will you tell me what you think happened with Dad that caused him to say 'no'?"

Ashley shook her head, "I don't know for sure, and it's not something anyone could ever talk about."

"I asked Aunt Elyse and she wouldn't tell me," I said. "Just give me a hint!"

Ashley shook her head again, "I can't. Even if I had proof, I couldn't."

"What could be so bad?"

"Drop it, please," Ashley said.

I glared at her because I was frustrated that she was so sure she knew the reason. I wondered how that was possible, but weirdly, I didn't doubt that she did know. I really wanted to know because if I knew, I might be able to achieve my fantasy, though it could no longer be Dad being first. That said, I was positive that it would be the best, most intensely pleasurable experience either of us would ever have.

"OK," I agreed. "Do you know where Stephie is?"

"She went to Shauna's house in a huff because Dad is entertaining and it bugs her."

"What bugs her is she has an itch she needs scratched, and she threw away her scratching post!"

Ashley giggled, "Nicholas is cute, but I'd never do that to Stephie, even if I was old enough."

I would, though, and I'd promised him that if he and Stephie weren't together, I'd make him the happiest boy on the planet!

 Steve

"That was a surprise," Danielle said as we cuddled after long, slow, sensual lovemaking.

"You suggested we do my favorite thing, and that's it."

"It was totally different and made me feel totally different," Danielle said.

"Almost like...love."

"It's not called 'making love' for nothing," I replied. "But there are multiple types of 'love' and English doesn't convey them. I suspect you know at least three."

"You mean the Greek words for love?"

"Yes. No pastor worth his salt will ignore those, even if he is preaching on behalf of the 'Prince of this World' rather than teaching the Gospel."

"You think Pastor Dwight is serving Satan?"

"I think Calvinism is pure evil," I replied. "And it makes God into a monster. If it's true, Satan was right to rebel and set up his own shop!"

"Wow! Elizabeth and Tabitha said you knew your theology and your Bible despite being agnostic."

"Jesus' message, when not filtered through Paul, is very different. I find wisdom there which is useful. And Jesus wasn't preoccupied with sex the way Paul was!"

"Well, having had sex, I can see why someone would think about it a lot!"

I chuckled, "Yes, but your view appears to be positive, unlike Paul's. What would you like to do next?"

"Suck you while you lick me, and have you cum in my mouth. Then fuck me hard, front and back! We'll figure out what to do after that."

"As you wish!"



November 12, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Can I ask you a question privately?" Zahra inquired when we met at Hyde Park Avenue to walk to school on Tuesday morning.

"I'll walk ahead," Fangsu, who had been walking with me, offered.

She did and Zahra and I waited until we were far enough behind her so that Zahra wouldn't be heard.

"I talked to your brother, and I got mixed signals," she said quietly.

"Because you're Muslim and he's Christian, right?"

"How did you know?"

"Because I know both you and my brother. And I know he's too nice to intentionally do something that might hurt someone."

"You mean go on dates because I would never reject my faith and he would never reject his?"

"Exactly. Is it OK to be direct?"

"Yes, so long as you don't insult the Prophet."

"I'll keep my opinion of that to myself," I said. "But I can think of only one reason you would want to go out with Jesse, knowing you could never marry him."

Zahra blushed, confirming I was correct.

"It's against my faith," she said.

"And Jesse's."

"But he has, hasn't he?"

"That's a question I shouldn't really answer, but if you ask him, he'll answer honestly. Can I ask why?"

"I don't know," Zahra replied. "It just...I just want to, even though I know it's wrong."

"You mean because Islam says it's wrong," I replied. "You know I have, and I don't think it's wrong."

"I'm not sure what to do."

"I can't answer that for you," I said. "Your options are to forget it, or to go see him and take off your scarf. He'll understand what that means, but he might say 'no' because he'd be concerned that you'll expect him to convert."

"I just don't know," Zahra sighed.

"Then the answer is to wait," I replied. "Let's catch up to Fangsu."

 Steve

"Nobody's home?" Danielle asked when we went to the kitchen for a late breakfast on Tuesday morning.

"The kids are all in school, Kara and Jess are teaching, and Natalie and Yuriko have class."

"Your wives mentioned the sauna and whirlpool. Could we use those?"

"Yes, of course."

"And do it in there?"

"Yes, of course!" I agreed.

"Then we'll continue our sexual odyssey in your sauna after breakfast!"

We'd done as Danielle had asked -- sixty-nine until I came, then sharing a kiss with her mouth once again full of my cum; fucking hard as we had the first time; and then fucking her ass and filling it with cum. We'd cleaned up, had a snack, rested, then had another slow, sensual screw before sleeping cuddled together. When we'd woken up, Danielle had sucked me until I was hard, then had ridden me hard before we'd showered and dressed so we could have breakfast.

"Was there anything else in *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* that you were interested in doing?"

"You want a threesome, don't you?!"

I chuckled, "My life is a foursome, so that's kind of the norm, not something special, at least from my perspective. Is that something *you* want to do?"

"Well, I watched someone have sex, then was watched while I lost my virginity, in every possible way, so maybe. But I have no idea who, because Elizabeth doesn't want to see you again that way, and she'd be the only one I'd even consider."

"You can always save that for a future boyfriend," I replied. "It's like the question of playing with toys."

"Do they come with instructions?" Danielle asked.

I chuckled, "Not in my experience, but I guarantee you can find plenty of instructional videos on the internet."

"Porn?"

"That's what I was referring to, but I'm sure you could also find text descriptions, or ask the clerks at the Pleasure Chest, which is a store that caters to fetishes. They have both a male and female clerk on duty at all times, and they'll answer questions."

"And if I wanted you to teach me?"

"I would, but again, perhaps that's something to save for a future boyfriend."

"I'll think about it. There's no time limit, is there?"

"Dalliances typically have a short timeframe -- a few weeks, or occasionally a few months, but there's no specific time limit. There are a few girls I see perhaps once a year, or even less often, who are dalliances. There are also one-off encounters that we call deflowerings, which this would be if you choose not to continue after tomorrow morning."

"I think at least once more after tomorrow, assuming you want to."

"I do. You're fun and enthusiastic, the two primary traits."

"Not my boobs?"

"Contra the stereotype, I prefer them smaller. Jessica, Suzanne, Natalie, and Yuriko are perfect examples. Kara is the exception, though she's not nearly as well-endowed as you are."

"I know what the book said, but size wise? I mean you?"

"According to a former lover, slightly above average. I can't say for sure, given I've never seen another erect penis except in the few porn movies I've seen."

"What are those like?"

"Mostly inane, contrived, and boring," I replied. "But then again, I'm living in a fantasy world."

"Three wives and two girlfriends?"

"And an apparently unlimited supply of nubile girls who want to be deflowered!"

Danielle laughed softly, "Guilty as charged! I should introduce you to Pastor Dwight's daughter!"

"I've had run-ins with two evangelical pastors, both of them in Ohio when I no longer lived there. I'd prefer to avoid that with someone in Illinois. They could cause no end of trouble, even if his daughter is over eighteen."

"Seventeen and holier than thou!"

"A very bad idea," I replied. "Honestly, I'd prefer to stay away from situations such as that. Elizabeth wisely kept her mask on until the next morning."

"And me?"

"Call it a favor to Elizabeth and Tabitha, not that I regret it in any way! I just need to not put a bigger target on my back. And speaking of that, when you do make your announcement, please limit the details so they can't find out who you were with. No 'married to three women' or 'has seven kids' or 'lives in Kenwood' or any details such as that."

"My lips are sealed about the details! But I am going to tell them what happened!"

"That's up to you, obviously, just be smart about it."

"I will! Now finish eating so we can fuck in your sauna and whirlpool!"

"As you wish!"

 Jesse

My phone rang as I was walking home with Brooke after school on Tuesday. I slid it from my pocket and saw who was calling, then flipped open the phone.

"Go for Jesse!"

"Hi, Jesse! It's Scarlett! Would you like some company Thanksgiving weekend?"

"I don't have any specific plans. What were you thinking?"

"I could fly down early on Friday morning, then fly back on Sunday night. My parents won't mind so long as I'm there for Thanksgiving dinner with my grandparents."

"That would be OK with me. You should book your tickets today, though."

"I actually reserved them a couple of weeks ago. I have to buy them by tomorrow. I wasn't sure if it would work out, but our family plans changed from going to my grandparents' house in Michigan to them coming here."

"Then I'll see you on the 29th!"

"Great!"

We said 'goodbye' and I closed the phone and slipped it back into my pocket.

"Which of your many women was that?" Brooke asked with a smirk.

"Scarlett, from Minnesota."

"Things have really changed from last year with the «filles du jour»."

"Most of them now have boyfriends," I replied. "And you know CeCe is away at Arizona State."

"Do you hear from her at all?"

"No. She was a bit upset that I wouldn't be her boyfriend, but it's not like I ever said I would or hinted at it. And she was always planning to go out of state for college."

"The same problem as with Angelina, right? I mean being her boyfriend?"

"And others," I replied. "But those are the only two who were really upset."

"What about the girl from church?"

"She was hoping we'd eventually be a couple, but she can't handle our family."

"Your family is pretty much for anyone to take!"

I chuckled, "You seem to be doing OK."

"I like integrating with you and don't much care about the rest of your family! We're just having fun."

"I'm curious, but what do you think about being in the sauna with my family?"

"That depends," Brooke smirked.

"On?"

"If your dad would integrate with me!"

"As I've said to Libby, you're free to ask, but then you and I would just be friends with no benefits."

"I'm teasing," Brooke said. "He's good looking, but he's too old for me. I could see a guy who was maybe a Sophomore in college, you know, around twenty, but your dad is close to forty, right?"

"Thirty-nine," I replied.

"So more than twice our age. I'll stick to getting stuck by the Duck!"

I laughed, "This duck is more than happy to stick you!"

"We need to do our math homework first, though," Brooke said.

"Business before pleasure!" I agreed.

"Walk faster!"

 Steve

"Steve-san?" Yuriko inquired mid-afternoon on Tuesday. "Is your friend joining us for dinner?"

"Yes. I'm taking her back to Trinity tomorrow morning."

"She appears to be very happy! I'm not surprised!"

"You were very happy!"

"I still am! Sakurako is jealous because I have years to be with you!"

"And yet, she's exactly where she belongs and is very happy."

"Yes, of course! But had there been a way, she would have taken you for a husband. I certainly would, if there were a way!"

"Do you plan to marry a Japanese man?"

"I think it's a necessity," she replied. "I must honor my grandfather, and I would not want my children to suffer. If I were staying in the US, then I would perhaps make a different choice. But you know Japan."

I nodded, "I do."

"Would you like tea, Danielle-chan?" she asked as Danielle came into the kitchen from the Playroom area.

"Yes, please," Danielle replied. "Where in Japan are you from, Yuriko?"

"Oguni," Yuriko said as she poured tea into a porcelain cup, "which is in Yamagata Prefecture. Yamagata Prefecture is located in the northwest of the island of Honshu, which is the largest and main island of Japan."

"How did you meet Steve?"

"He visited the karate school in Oguni when I was thirteen, but I was just a little girl then, and he was the older, handsome, strong American man! I met him again when I came here for university."

"Thirteen?" Danielle asked.

"No, not like that," Yuriko said. "I knew I wanted to, but I was too young. I was twenty when I was first with him, though I would certainly have succumbed to my desire had he been interested when I first met him. But I was immature and I had to grow up first."

"You seem to do a lot around the house."

"It pleases me to serve Steve-sama and his family."

"And he pleases you in return?" Danielle asked.

Yuriko laughed softly, "Yes, of course, but I do those things because I want them, not because it is required or a trade. He is an expert lover, as I'm sure you are aware."

"Well, even with nothing to compare it to, I would have to agree."

"I, too, have nothing with which to compare it, but it is true nonetheless. Steve-sama will be my only lover before I marry."

"Is it OK to ask why?"

"Because he is very special to me, and because I want no one else. I will eventually go home, and then I will find a good Japanese man. I will know he is good because he will wait until we are married, and then he will have the most exquisite pleasure a man can know!"

"Yuriko does not lack self-confidence," I said with a smile.

"Japanese women know how to give pleasure, and it is a sacred duty to do so!"

"What about your pleasure?" Danielle asked.

"Similar to Steve-sama, I draw my pleasure from giving pleasure. But do not misunderstand, I very much enjoy the pleasure he provides!"

"Interesting," Danielle observed. "Deriving pleasure from giving pleasure."

"Physical pleasure is fairly easy to achieve," I replied. "Emotional and spiritual pleasure is far more complex and more challenging to give and receive."

Danielle thought about it for a moment, then smiled as if a light had gone on.

"The difference between what we did first, and what we did second! I said it felt very different, and now I understand the difference! Intense physical pleasure versus emotional fulfillment, even without being 'in love'."

"Being 'in love' is a silly schoolgirl fantasy," Yuriko said. "I know, because that is how I first felt about Steve-sama. But then I learned about true feelings of love, which are much deeper and very different. And those feelings allow for a much deeper connection."

"Can anyone join this conversation?" Natalie asked, coming into the kitchen.

"Yes," I replied.

"«Хочешь чаю?» Yuriko asked. ('Khochesh chayu')

"«はい、お願いします», " Natalie replied. ('Hai, onegaishimasu').

"You speak Japanese?" Danielle asked.

"I'm teaching Yuriko Russian and she's teaching me Japanese. She asked me in Russian if I would like some tea, and I responded in Japanese that I would."

"Steve, do you speak either of those languages?"

"About a hundred words of either," I replied. "I speak fluent Swedish, passable Spanish, and a smattering of Dutch, German, and French."

"Why Russian, Natalie?" Danielle asked.

"I'm a Russian history major," Natalie replied. "I met Steve on a trip to Russia."

"Whoa! How did that happen?"

"His son and my sister played on a hockey team that was invited to play Russian youth teams and Steve was the first adult to ever treat me as an adult. One thing led to another, and we became lovers on that trip. I'll stay with him until I graduate, when I'm going to school in Russia."

"He did mention that, I simply didn't remember. It's like every time I turn around, I hear something new and exciting that I would never have considered. It's very different from how things were growing up."

"For me, too," Natalie said. "And for Yuriko. But we both agree this is the most amazing place to be, and anyone who has a relationship with Steve benefits from it, and I don't mean the sex, which is out of this world!"

"I'm curious, but how often?"

"When we want," Natalie said. "It works out to a few nights a month on average, but sometimes more often. But sex is a fringe benefit. The true benefit is the loving, open, accepting environment. Everyone is accepted here, no matter what their background, so long as they have an open mind."

"I don't know anyone who thinks like any of you. Well, I didn't before I met Steve, anyway."

"It's a very different take on life, the universe, and everything than you find anywhere else. OK to ask what you plan to do after tomorrow?"

"Finish out my semester at Trinity, then move in with Tabitha and John. They have a spare room in their house, and she'll help me get a job at Starbucks. After that, the future is wide open, but I hope to meet a guy like Steve or John. In a year or two, I'll go back to school and get a degree in something that would lead to a career rather than an M.R.S degree. I don't know what yet, though, but I have time to figure it out."

"That sounds like the typical progression for a conservative girl who encounters Steve!" Natalie observed. "She has her mind opened and her future becomes unlimited. That's what happened with Kara."

"And now, I understand what she meant about the cage door being opened."

"You're free," Natalie said. "And your life is only what you make it."

"Well," Danielle smirked, "What I want right now is sex!"

"Dinner is at 6:30pm," Yuriko said. "You have about four hours!"

Danielle downed the last of her tea, grabbed my hand, and basically dragged me into the Playroom.

XLVII. Deal Maker

November 13, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"Any final thoughts?" I asked Danielle as I merged my BMW onto the Dan Ryan for our drive to Trinity.

"I think I need some time to wrap my head around everything that I did and learned. Strangely, I think the conversations were more important than the sex."

"Then you learned the most important thing I could teach you," I said.

"You mean having an open mind and being accepting of different ideas and approaches?"

"Yes. Or, as I've called it in the past, being a subversive. That's the main point of our Philosophy Club -- to explore alternatives and attempt to change as many individuals as possible. Society is something of a lost cause at the moment because politicians and the media have worked hand-in-hand to create moral panic and groupthink."

"But isn't your group like-minded?" Danielle inquired.

"Only about being open-minded. Would you say Yuriko and Natalie think the same way about everything?"

"No."

"Nor do my wives and I, my children and I, my children and each other, or any of all our friends and acquaintances. In fact, the people I'm closest to are the ones

most likely to challenge my thinking or present alternatives. You'll see that once you begin coming to Philosophy Club."

"I did check with Kara and she said it was OK to see you again, and spend the night."

"Thank you for asking."

"It was weird the first time, but this morning it was easy to do."

"Being open about sex is one of the traits that is emphasized in our group philosophy, while also acknowledging that everyone's sexuality is different."

"Your kids all gave me knowing looks and all of them except Stephe were smirking. She seemed annoyed."

"She's annoyed at the world," I replied. "It stems from a strained relationship with her 'One, True, Love'."

"At twelve?"

"My son Matthew basically got engaged at age five and I have no doubt he will never even date a girl besides Chelsea. Albert is married!"

"Oh, come on!" Danielle laughed. "Now you're pulling my leg!"

"He and his girlfriend Jane had Jesse marry them when they were six. She lives in England, and they see each other at least once a year, and chat on the computer, too. It might well end with them marrying, but we'll see. We're also convinced that once Nicholas hits puberty, he'll change his mind about Stephe."

"Just when I thought it couldn't get any weirder!"

I laughed, "If you think that, I've failed miserably!"

"I don't, but that doesn't mean I'm not surprised at just about every turn!"

"Good! Just out of curiosity, when do you plan to break the news to your ex-fiancé?"

"The Sunday following Thanksgiving. That will be my last day in church, too!"

"May I suggest not throwing out the baby with the bathwater and finding a suitable expression of spirituality that serves your needs?"

"Loki worship?" she asked with a smile.

"That's a love-hate relationship, and worship is not part of it! But he's the personification of Fate that works best for me. My spirituality is more nuanced and eclectic. Your rejection of Calvinism is positive, but rejecting that doesn't mean rejecting Christianity because Calvinism is most decidedly not authentic Christianity. The closest I've seen is the Eastern Orthodox Church, though that might be a bit too 'high church' for you.

"But don't limit yourself to only Western expressions of spirituality. There is much to learn from the East -- Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto, and general Chinese philosophy. I think a good place to start, given where you are in life, is with something Western, but not specifically religious -- *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Read that, and I think you'll see plenty of parallels with how I live my life."

"That's science fiction, right?"

"Yes, but soft science fiction, in that the main point is philosophy, not whiz-bang technology or alien races or interstellar travel. Another book to read is *Atlas*

Shrugged by Ayn Rand, though read that the way you would *Das Kapital* or *The Communist Manifesto*."

"What do you mean?"

"Internalize the critiques they make, but take their solutions with a truckload of salt. Marx and Engels asked some very good questions, but their answers leave a lot to be desired. Ayn Rand has a very good critique of the welfare state, but her answer, grounded in objectivism, is impractical, unworkable, and somewhat silly. But that doesn't diminish the value of her observations."

"Interesting."

"Read those two books and they'll prepare you for the next stage of your journey, including Philosophy Club."

"OK. I'll get copies of them. I assume Borders would have them?"

"I'm positive. If not, they can get them for you. Or check them out at the public library."

"Can I ask you a question about...hmm, sexual ethics, I guess?"

"If you came up with that phrase on your own, you're miles ahead of the game!"

"Let's just say that my thought patterns were thoroughly scrambled by a combination of amazing sex and amazing conversation."

"A mindfuck to go with the physical fuck."

"That word is perfect because the patterns are reassembling in very different ways."

"What's your question?"

"When is the right time to have sex with someone?"

"When you're ready and you both want to. I can't give you a more exact answer than that. It could be minutes, hours, days, weeks, or years after you meet them. And yes, I've had situations in each of those ranges. The longest was about sixteen years from acknowledging mutual desire until consummation."

"Why?"

"Events conspired to cause us to wait, and ultimately, the wait was worth it! At the opposite end is a girl in a mask asking me to deflower her! There have been a few other instances like that one, where the decision time was measured in minutes, even if it took an hour or two before consummation. Again, the only limitations are ones you or your partner or potential partner impose. Nobody else has a say in the matter."

"You might not be able to answer, but have you had someone who had an even more radical deflowering?"

"An Evangelical girl who asked to be jointly deflowered by me and my female lover."

"I sense a pattern!"

"Evangelical girls who want to be bad know the Compound is the place to come to make that happen!"

Danielle laughed, "Cute. You're paraphrasing Lance in *Pulp Fiction*, right?"

"Yes! You've seen it?"

"It was on the list of movies that was provided!"

"May I ask what else besides *The Princess Bride*?"

"*Doctor Zhivago*, *Star Trek II*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *American Beauty*."

"Someone paid attention, that's for sure! Though that last one isn't one I'd recommend."

"Because of the outcome?"

"I disagree with the main character's philosophy, even if I understand it."

"You mean being unable to have sex with her because she turned out to be a 'good girl', not a 'bad girl'?"

"Yes. She obviously wanted to have sex, and only his own mental block prevented it. I've been guilty of that in the past, but it usually involved not acknowledging young women were as mature as they actually were. I got over it, though I do have a tendency to talk girls to death beforehand."

"Me, but not Elizabeth."

"Different circumstances. She more or less precluded it, which, now that I think about it, was likely part of her decision to make it anonymous, at least at first."

"But our conversation was nothing like the one you had with Tabitha!"

"Correct. Why might that be?"

Danielle thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Two different people in similar, but different, circumstances. We both knew what we wanted, but she didn't really understand what she was asking for, so you were blunt and harsh with her. I knew exactly what I wanted, and knew exactly what I was asking for, so you approached it differently."

"Exactly right. Going back to sexual ethics, there's something important I need to say. First, who you have sex with is your business, and nobody else's, including mine. That said, if you choose to be with someone else, they absolutely have to have had a clean STI test, or we can't be together without significant time passing and you having a pair of clean tests. That's to keep you, me, and my family safe."

"I don't plan on being with anyone before I'm with you again, and I absolutely want to be with you again."

"Just promise me that you'll follow that rule in the future, too, along with always using birth control."

"The last thing I want to do is get pregnant! Give me five or six years, but not now, no way!"

"Those considerations often go out the window in the heat of the moment."

"Which is how one girl in our church found herself in what they euphemistically called 'the family way'."

"I've heard similar stories, and know at least one person for whom that happened. The vasectomy eliminated that particular risk for me."

"OK, help the clueless Evangelical Christian girl, but if they cut them, how does anything come out?"

"Ejaculate contains numerous other things besides sperm. The vasectomy only prevents sperm from mixing into the ejaculate. Go back and read the section in *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* on male physiology and pay careful attention."

"That book has so much good information."

"It does. At one point I jokingly called it *You Want Me To Do What and Put It Where?* because it explained things no teacher in health class would dare discuss!"

Danielle laughed, "It did open my eyes, because I had NO clue about how sex worked beyond the very basic 'insert, move, ejaculate, withdraw, baby is made' version they explained in health class."

"At least you were allowed to attend those sessions. When I was in High School, most of Kara's friends weren't permitted to go."

"Well, I certainly had my thorough sex education these past two days!"

"And in a sense, you only scratched the surface. That said, what we did may be all you ever do, and there's nothing wrong with that at all. Each person discovers what they want and what they like and they do that, in consultation with their partner."

"Scratched the surface?"

"There are many expressions of sexuality that are only obliquely mentioned in the book. Some of the tamer ones are role-playing and simple toys. The only limits are your imagination, comfort level, and any health concerns."

"You mean like washing after you put it in my butt?"

"Yes. The last thing you want is *E. coli* in your upper GI system or in your vagina. Similarly, if you use condoms, you want to be very careful to not allow leaks and not to take chances of allowing any cum anywhere near your vagina. It's not impossible to get pregnant without penetration. The correct techniques are described in the book, so go back and read those sections, if appropriate."

"I think I'll go on the Pill to be safe."

"Wise," I replied. "Now that you've had sex, you should also have a regular gynecological exam with a Pap smear."

"That was in the book, and I will."

"Any other questions?" I asked as we neared Trinity.

"None that I can think of that you would answer."

"What's the question you think I won't answer?"

"Where do I rank among the two hundred plus girls?"

"You're right; I won't answer. That said, I will say that I very much enjoyed engaging in raw, animalistic, mattress-pounding, headboard-banging, multi-orgasmic fucking with you, and I want to do it again!"

"I can't legitimately complain about that answer! I want that, too!"

Danielle gave me a kiss at the last light before Trinity, so that nobody would see us kiss on campus, which might cause her trouble before she left at the end of the

semester. I dropped her at the same place I had picked her up, waved, then headed into the city for work.

 Jesse

"Hot chocolate OK?" I asked Missy when we met outside Starbucks.

"That's cool."

"Hi, Jesse!" Tabitha exclaimed when we walked in. "What can I get you and your friend?"

"Two Venti hot cocoas with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles, please."

"Coming right up!"

She rang up the purchase, I paid with my debit card, and we moved to the end of the counter where our drinks would be delivered.

"You come here so often she remembers you?" Missy asked.

"She's a friend of my dad's," I replied. "And she comes to our Sunday afternoon Hangouts."

"I heard about those from Birgit, but my parents didn't think it was a good idea."

"Parents don't like teens being subversive, but the thing is, teens are naturally subversive, and it's not like there aren't other places to get information and talk to people."

"When Dad lived with us, he had some kind of blocking software on the computer. When he moved out, he took the computer, so Mom bought a new computer, and it doesn't have any blocks."

"Blocks are dumb because all you have to do is go to the public library, which has no blocks of any kind! The only limit there would be that people could see your screen except for one or two computers that face the wall and away from the aide who helps with computers. They won't stop you unless you're publicly displaying 'inappropriate' content. That's how a few guys on the hockey team use the internet because their parents are so strict."

"Mom and Dad aren't too bad, but they're not anything like your parents!"

"When's your next hockey game?" Missy asked.

"Saturday away against Lane Tech. Our next home game is the following week against Chicago Latin."

"What's the difference? I mean, is it rinks?"

"Lane Tech is on the North Side, and we'll play in their home rink. Our home rink is Johnny's Ice House, just west of the Loop. If you want to see a home game, just ask any of the girls on the softball team, and you could get a ride, I'm sure. Some of them come to away games, too."

"I hear you guys are really good."

"We're undefeated this season, but we had a great season last year then choked in the playoffs."

"What else do you do besides play hockey?"

"Hang out with my friends, play video games, and go to church. What about you?"

"Yearbook, school newspaper, and hang out with my friends."

"The Girl Gang," I replied.

"That's what your dad calls it. He's pretty cool for an old guy!"

I laughed, "I'll let him know!"

"No! Don't!" Missy begged.

"Jesse!" the barista called out.

"I was teasing," I said as we picked up our cups and went to a table in the corner. We give him a hard time about being old because he's almost forty, but my grandpa, his dad, turned eighty-five in August."

"Wow! My grandpa is only sixty-three!"

"My grandpa didn't marry until he was in his forties because he was in the Navy and then worked for a government agency."

"Government agency? You mean like the CIA?"

"It was the OSS first, but then the CIA, yes."

"Whoa! What about your other grandpa?"

"Two, actually. Grandpa Block and Grandpa Dolan are both in their sixties and had normal jobs."

"My mom's dad died at sixty-four, but both my grandmas and other grandpa are alive."

"How do things work with your dad?"

"It's a pain in the butt because it means I can't hang out with the Girl Gang on Friday night. I complained to the judge and the social worker, but because of school and Dad's work schedule, that's the only time that works. Once I turn eighteen, I can decide totally for myself, but right now, with Dad paying child support and alimony, it helps my mom if I cooperate."

"Do you and your dad get along?"

"Yes. He's OK, and always treated me well. He had an affair with a nursing student and mom found out."

"That does tend to create disharmony! You're not angry with him?"

"I was, but then I found out that mom had an affair with a doctor for revenge, so it kind of cancels out."

"Cheating is pretty much always wrong," I said. "Even in revenge."

"I agree, but nobody asked me beforehand!"

"For what I think are pretty obvious reasons."

"Yes, of course. It wasn't my business, but it affected me."

"Which is mostly what I hear from the other kids whose parents divorced."

"You can do pretty much anything you want, right?" Missy asked.

"It might seem so, but in practice, I have to be responsible and mature, which means not doing anything too crazy."

"But you and your sister can have your girlfriend or boyfriend sleep over, which my parents would consider crazy!"

"Even there, it's about being mature and responsible, which means everyone has STI tests and we use birth control. But most parents are really hung up about that, so it doesn't happen very often."

"What's it like to sleep in the same bed with someone?"

"Warm!" I replied.

"Better than a flannel nightgown and a hot water bottle, I'm sure!"

"Way better!"

I had a pretty good idea of what Missy wanted, but I wasn't going to press the issue and wait to see what she said and did. She sipped her hot cocoa several times before she spoke again.

"Have you decided where to go to college?"

"UW Madison is my first choice," I said. "I'll take the SAT and ACT in June, then apply there, along with the University of Minnesota, University of Chicago, and Northwestern."

"What are you going to study?"

"Business and hopefully sports management, but there aren't any specific classes for that, though I can do independent study. You're a Frosh, right?"

"Yes. That isn't a problem, is it?"

"No. I'm a Junior, so I'm only two years older than you are. I should tell you that I don't plan to date anyone exclusively, but I'm happy to go on dates with you if you want."

"You don't want a girlfriend?" Missy asked.

"I have lots of girlfriends," I replied, "in that I am friends with lots of girls and hang out with them. What I don't have is an exclusive relationship because I'm way too young for that."

"So, if you really like someone, then what?"

"Then we hang out and are friends and see what happens. If we're still close and we still like each other and we both think the other one is special, when I'm a Junior or Senior in college, then it would be a different story. I prefer the freedom of just hanging out with the gang on Friday nights and having my Hangouts and playing hockey without having to worry about what someone else thinks. As one of my grown-up friends has said -- I have my whole life to be serious with someone, so there's no reason to rush."

"That sounds like how Birgit feels."

"We agree on quite a few things, even if we are siblings!"

Missy laughed, "Birgit's only problem with people is when they don't do what she wants them to do when she wants them to do it!"

"And with me, she's been disappointed her entire life!"

"You guys didn't use to get along."

"We always loved each other, but we were battling for world domination. We finally agreed to divide the world between us!"

"Now you sound just like her!"

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Both, I think!" Missy declared with a silly smile.

 Birgit

"Fascinating," Bob said when I showed him my new toy on Wednesday afternoon.

"OK, Mr. Spock!" I giggled. "What do you think?"

"I think 'intimidated' is the right word."

"Seriously? It's smaller than you!"

"Yes, and as the proud owner of one of those, I put it in YOU. I've never had one put in me!"

"They make bigger ones!" I giggled. "I felt this was more appropriate."

"Thanks, I think," Bob said. "Bigger might be truly frightening!"

"Size matters!" I giggled. "But knowing what to do with it matters more!"

"And you've certainly taught me good technique!"

"It's in my own self-interest!" I declared.

"I'm curious what that would look like on you," Bob said. "But I'm not sure I want to do it."

"I understand," I said, remembering the cautions Elyse had voiced.

I quickly stripped off my clothes and put on the harness. I'd tested it the previous night, so I knew how to put it on. Once it was buckled, I slipped the dildo into the pouch and looked over at the full-length mirror and giggled.

"That is just...weird!" Bob said. "I mean, a girl with a dong?"

"I suddenly lost half my IQ points!" I giggled.

"Hardy-har-har!" Bob said sarcastically.

"You boys think this is powerful, but it's not, really! First of all, with THIS," I pointed to my pussy, "I can get as many of THESE," I pointed to the fake dick, "as I want! And you could pound me for hours and my pussy would still be ready for action! Ten or twelve minutes and you shrivel up! Sure, you can get it up again, but I don't have to wait and there's no limit!"

"You're very strange, Birgit!" Bob declared.

"I know! But that's what makes me fun!"

"Would you put the toy away?"

"Sure," I agreed, not wanting to go against what Aunt Elyse had advised.

I removed the dildo and harness, and put them in my locking drawer with my 'personal massager' then went over to Bob.

"If you take off your clothes, I'll give you an amazing blowjob, and then you can fuck me!"

"Deal!" he agreed excitedly.

 Jesse

Missy and I finished our cocoa and started walking home, with her house being beyond mine.

"Thanks for the cocoa," she said.

"You're welcome. Do you want me to walk you home?"

"That would be sweet!"

"Did you still want to do something together?" I asked.

"Sure, when?"

"I'm pretty busy this weekend because my hockey team is having a party. How about a week from Saturday?" I asked.

"Sure! What?"

"I'll leave it up to you. Just give me your address and I'll pick you up at 5:30pm, if that works."

"It does. You'll have to meet my dad, but don't worry because he knows Ashley's mom."

"That could be good or bad," I said.

Missy laughed, "He's jealous of your dad, so don't worry. Could we meet for cocoa again next week?"

"Yes."

"Cool!"

When we got to Missy's house, I walked her up to the door. She opened the door, kissed my cheek, then stepped inside.

"Thanks again, Jesse. See you at school!"

"See you at school."

She closed the door, and I headed home.



November 14, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"Alderman Burnett?" I inquired of a man who matched the photo on his website.

"Mr. Adams?"

"Steve, please," I said, extending my hand.

"Walter," he said, taking my hand.

"You OK with the low Japanese tables and «zabuton»?"

"Those are the pillows, right?"

"Yes. If you need back support, they also have «zaisu», which have backs."

"I think I can handle the pillows."

I nodded and asked the kimono-clad hostess to seat us, and she led us to a table, handing each of us menus.

"I recommend the «Bento» but everything on the menu is excellent."

I ordered the «Bento» without rice, substituting a small salad with a soy dressing, and the Alderman ordered the «Bento» with no substitutions.

"I understand you lived in Cabrini Green," I said.

"A child of the projects. You're from a small town outside Cincinnati."

"We can both read websites," I replied with a smile.

"You need your permits approved," he said.

"I do. We're a major employer in your ward and we like the location."

"Implying that you would move if you didn't receive the permits."

"I'm not making threats, Alderman," I said. "I'm simply saying that we need additional space, and want to tear down a building which is not historical in any

way except for its age. We want to expand and hire, and we need the space to do that. I hope you know from our website that we recruit from Harold Washington College and other City Colleges, along with UIC, and have a mentorship program for minorities, and one for women."

"My alma maters," he said with a smile.

"None of what I just said is fluff," I said, "though obviously I pointed out things we have in common. We're not asking for any favors, or a variance. We'd simply like to tear down what we call the Annex and build a building two stories taller. It doesn't dwarf the surrounding buildings, and would have a façade which matches the current building. We'll be using a minority owned general contractor with union labor, and as far as we can tell, there is nothing blocking our permit. If there is, please tell me and we'll cure it as quickly as possible."

"You don't beat around the bush!" he said as the waitress brought our tea and poured for each of us.

"I've never seen the point of doing that. I'm going to assume you pulled all the permitting documents. Is there anything at all that is wrong or needs a variance?"

"No."

"Then would you, please, apply the appropriate grease to the skids to have the building department approve the plans? I'd consider it a personal favor if you did."

"And you know how to return a favor?"

"Always. That is the main currency between me and my friends."

The waitress brought our «Bento» and set them before us.

"«Arigatou gozaimasu»,» I said to her.

"«Dō itashimashite»,» she replied.

Once she left, I said, "«Itadakimasu».»"

"Your bio says you trained at a karate school in Japan, but didn't mention you speaking Japanese, only Swedish."

"Only around a hundred and fifty words," I replied. "Many of them are related to karate. The others are mostly polite phrases."

"You said 'thank you', right?"

"Yes, then I said 'I humbly receive', which is the Japanese meal blessing."

"You like Japanese culture?"

"Parts of it," I replied. "But I respect their right to believe as they see fit, just as I do everyone else's rights to believe as they see fit. Tolerance means understanding people are different, and not treating them badly because of those differences. Our corporate culture is set up to enhance diversity of thought."

"You're doing a pretty strong sales job."

"Why not use all the arrows in my quiver? When you run for office, you make the best possible pitch to your potential constituents, and when we're trying to gain new business, NIKA makes the best possible pitch to potential clients. In this case, we want to work with you to expand our business and increase employment in your ward. That's a 'win-win' scenario. And, as I said, we're

unaware of any deficiencies in our permit applications and don't need any additional variances, both of which you confirmed."

I wondered if he was expecting a specific *quid pro quo*, but there was no way to find out without risking a very bad reaction if that wasn't the case. I'd already promised to owe him a favor, which was probably the most I could do under the circumstances, though even that was borderline. In the end, the only thing I had in my pocket was the implied threat to move NIKA. I didn't want that, but if, in the end, if we couldn't get the appropriate permits, we'd have no choice. Doing that would be a long process, and we might even have to move twice if we didn't want people in a building that wasn't co-located with our current space.

What I could do, though, was prompt him to ask me for whatever it was he wanted.

"You reviewed the applications before our meeting," I continued. "You said you were aware of no problems, and I believe you. I guess the bottom line is what it is we need to do to make this happen?"

"What do you know about affordable housing?" he asked.

I had to be careful how I responded to that. I knew that it went against every principle of real estate investors, as Alec Glass had made clear over the years. That meant financing was a problem, given that returns were limited. In addition, with low returns, owning and managing a building with 'affordable' housing could actually be a losing proposition, given property taxes, maintenance, and other considerations. I believed vouchers were a better choice, and in the end, would cost taxpayers less and spur development. But none of that mattered, given I'd done my research into Alderman Burnett.

"Housing costs are a problem for lower-wage workers," I replied. "Not being able to live close to their jobs costs them time and money to travel, which creates

financial challenges. I know it's an issue which is important to you, and I understand the philosophical and political arguments for doing so. That said, I don't invest in real estate, and neither does NIKA. I'm also not politically connected. I'd love to help if you have a suggestion."

"I've been trying to get appointments with a real estate investor and a hedge fund manager, and I'd like you to make the introductions."

I should have guessed that Samantha would somehow figure into the equation. And the investor had to be Alec Glass, because he was the only one I knew personally.

"I am happy to introduce you to anyone I know," I replied. "I can get you meetings, but you'll have to convince them to invest or back your projects. Who?"

"Samantha Spurgeon and Alec Glass."

"Consider it done," I replied. "I'll make the calls as soon as I get back to my office."

"Thank you."

We finished our lunch with small talk about the city, the weather, and the sports teams, and after a final handshake, I returned to the office. My first call was to Samantha.

"I'll take the meeting, but you do realize that goes against every single principle behind Spurgeon Capital."

"And you realize that even though I understand the difficult financial considerations, it fits my version of capitalism, right?"

"That if the capitalists don't find a way to share the wealth, it'll be taken from them by mobs with torches and pitchforks, thus it's always in the interest of the capitalist to share their gains."

"Or, in this case, take a lower margin on their investment. While I know that many of your major clients would balk, you could do it, and run it as a 'conscience fund'. Or, run it through Jeri, and have the Foundation back it, with donations from Spurgeon. That's a win-win in terms of taxes and political capital."

"Nobody here does real estate."

"And that's the second part of this. The Alderman also requested a meeting with Alec Glass. I know how that will end if I just straight up ask him to invest, but I think if you are willing to back a project and have him handle the REIT and other transactions, he'll agree to participate in this little venture."

"Your only alternative is to move, right?"

"Either that or we split the staff, and we do not want to do that. It goes against the corporate culture. Yes, we have development in Colorado Springs and Baltimore, but those are special cases. And yes, we could have support people anywhere, but you know how I feel about that. Let me ask you -- how many people do you have outside Chicago?"

"Point taken. Set up the meeting. One way or the other I'll back a project, but it can't lose money."

"Remember that political capital has value, and the last thing we want is to have no influence of any kind."

"You know my biggest fear, right?"

"That the political environment in Illinois turns ugly, at least with regard to capital, and then you have no choice but to move out of state."

"I hear whispers Ken Griffin isn't happy here, though Jonathan Kane is like you -- he fell in love with the city and it'll take a near-cataclysmic event for him to leave Chicago."

"Smart man!"

Samantha laughed, "I know how much you love your city, and I don't disagree. But at some point..."

"I know. I'm just hoping we haven't reached that point. Let's scratch the alderman's back and see if we can get this done. I did leave the implied threat that we'd move, and I played every card I had, including Zo's mentoring program for inner-city kids."

"OK. I'm in. I'll take the meeting. Have him get in touch."

"Will do. Now for the call to Alec."

"Good luck!"

We said 'goodbye' and I disconnected the call then dialed Alec's mobile number. He answered, and I explained what I wanted.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. I'm fairly toxic with Chicago politicians because of Lisa."

"Well, given Alderman Burnett has a felony conviction for bank robbery, I'm not sure he can object!"

"You're serious?"

"He served two years in prison for an armed bank robbery in Kankakee. He agreed to drive two friends to Kankakee, where they robbed the Momence Federal Savings and Loan of around \$3000. After the robbery, they stopped at a convenience store, where they stole a car and kidnapped its driver at gunpoint.

"They weren't exactly criminal masterminds, because they were arrested almost immediately, and charged with armed robbery, aggravated kidnapping, and armed violence. Our future Alderman pled guilty to armed robbery in exchange for the other charges being dropped. He claimed he didn't know his buddies planned to rob the bank, but accepted he was responsible for being with them, and admitted he was stupid."

"They passed a law that prevents felons from holding office."

"I know, but for some reason, that hasn't been applied to him. Maybe there was something in the plea agreement, or he was somehow grandfathered, or maybe it's one of those 'home rule' issues where Chicago can ignore laws they force on the rest of the state,"

"Affordable housing is a losing proposition."

"I hear you, but you won't provide the financing nor carry any debt for this. It'll all be from Samantha Spurgeon, possibly funneled through the Lundgren Foundation. Samantha doesn't do real estate, and I suspect nobody at Spurgeon has the appropriate licenses. They need you, your licenses, and your expertise in setting up and running REITs. Fundamentally, this won't put you at risk."

"Except to having my arm twisted in the future."

"That's always a risk, but you know any Alderman can block any permit and veto any variances or zoning changes in his or her ward. And I have the strong impression that Alderman Burnett will veto any project in his ward that doesn't have an affordable housing component. Think of this as an investment in the future, because that's the wave of the future for progressive Democrats, and you and I both know that's going to easily be a majority of the City Council within a decade."

"I don't disagree, but that doesn't mean I like it."

"You know my theory of capital."

"Make sure the general public shares in your wealth because they have the power to take it all from you."

"Bingo. Even if you only accept that as a utilitarian argument, it's proven true historically and it won't be any different in the future. France, Imperial Russia, and a host of other examples come to mind. Being a 'friend of the people' is a survival tactic."

"I hate it when you're right!" Alec declared. "At least on this topic."

I chuckled, "Sorry. Will you take the meeting? I'll broker the deal in the end."

"Sure. It can't hurt to meet him."

"Thanks. How is Lisa doing?"

"Probably about how you would expect. She's in medium security, but short of a pardon or commutation, she's never getting out. And given what happened after she cut the first deal, nobody is going to cut her any slack."

"How are you and Wendy doing?"

"We're good. And your extended family?"

"Everything is good. Why don't you come play poker with us the first Saturday in December? Or come to breakfast this Saturday?"

"I appreciate the invite. Let me see what Wendy has planned."

"I hope to see you. I'm going to call the Alderman's office and let him know it's OK to contact you and Samantha."

"Sounds good."

We said 'goodbye' and I disconnected the call. I placed a call to Alderman Burnett's office and left a message that both Samantha and Alec would meet with him and provided their direct numbers. Once that was complete, I went to see my sister.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"He had his ask, but was careful not to make it a *quid pro quo*."

"How bad?"

"He wants Samantha and Alec to back an affordable housing project."

"He's not asking small, is he?"

"No, but I spoke with Samantha and Alec and I think I have a solution that will work. We might need to bring the Lundgren Foundation in so that we can funnel the cash tax-free to the project, but I can make that happen."

"And we'll get our permits?"

"Yes, and if Burnett tries to pull a fast one, Samantha can pull out. I did leave the implication that we'd move if we didn't get the permits. I also pointed out all the things we do for the community, and that there were no issues with the permit applications."

"I knew you could find a way, Big Brother. Thanks."

"You're welcome! I'm now going back to my regularly scheduled day job!"

I left her office and rejoined Penny for a coding session.

XLVIII. Explorations and Missteps

November 15, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Friday morning, after Birgit, Suzanne, Yuriko, and I ran, I showered, cuddled Birgit, then had breakfast with my wives, girlfriends, and kids.

"When do you leave for Arizona?" Jessica asked.

"Late Wednesday morning. I'll be back on Friday afternoon. I'm flying first class and Dante is paying for it!"

"And no way to enjoy the Mile-High Club!" Kara teased.

"Penny offered to go along and suggested Samantha's plane, given Dante is paying!"

"Of course she did! She's never going to give up, even if you frustrate her for another sixty years!"

"She can chase me while I'm using my walker!" I chuckled.

"You'd be a hundred, right?" Albert asked casually.

"Yes, even more ancient than I am now!"

"Seriously, do you think Grandpa Adams will live to be a hundred?"

"I think there's a very, very good chance of that. He's healthy, and has had no heart trouble. At age eighty-five, he has a very good chance. And I'm hoping that happens."

"That just seems so old," Ashley observed. "I mean that's nine times how old I am now!"

"I hope Dad lives at least that long!" Birgit declared.

"That is one thing none of us have any control over," Jessica said with a note of sadness.

"Birgit Andersson, Stephie, Nick, Jorge, Belinda, and others," I replied quietly.

"I think I want to go to Puerto Rico next year," Jessica said. "In November."

"You should," I said. "I'll come with you if you want."

"Let me think about it."

"Puerto Rico?" Ashley asked.

"That's where Jorge is buried," I said. "He was very special to all of us, especially to your mom."

"But I thought..." Birgit said. "Uhm, never mind. Not my business."

"You're getting smarter, Sis!" Ashley smirked.

"As they said in the 50s, 'Blow!'"

"Not anytime soon, but I will, eventually!" Ashley smirked.

"TMI!" Albert declared.

"And on THAT note, I'm heading to the office!" I declared.

 Birgit

"Would it be cool if Meghan and I joined the gang for dinner and the movie tonight?" Bob asked as we walked to the cafeteria for lunch.

"Sure! The more the merrier!" I exclaimed.

"Are you busy on Sunday?"

"No."

"Want to try out your new toy?"

"YES!" I exclaimed. "YES!"

Bob laughed, "Excited much?"

"Duh! Bring Meghan and we'll have even more fun!"

Bob laughed, "If you told me a year ago I'd have a girl *demanding* I have a threesome, I'd have said you were crazy!"

"I *am* crazy!" I declared. "Or as Hannah said, I'm 'one seriously warped individual'! But that's to your benefit!"

"True! I don't think Meghan is ready for that just yet."

"I know you might not answer, but..."

"Yes."

"And you still want to see me?"

"Yes! Did you think that would mean I'd stop seeing you?"

"Er, maybe because of what happened with Peter and Julie."

"He wanted to be your boyfriend; you and I are just fuck buddies and photography buddies."

"I'd say we should take photos on Sunday, but stupid old men and nosy old biddies think it's illegal even if they're just for you and me and we're in the pictures!"

"Don't you think kids are abused that way?"

"Sure, but people are killed with hammers and we don't go banning them. And don't even get me started on how many people die in automobile accidents! Just because something can be misused or is dangerous doesn't mean it should be banned completely. And if you want complete immorality, I give you nuclear weapons! They're terror weapons!"

"It's good to know you don't have strong opinions," Bob teased.

"Hah-hah."

We had to stop teasing because we got into the lunch line, and the lunch ladies wouldn't appreciate our 'coarse talk' and would report us. We got our lunches and sat down with Fangsu, Zahra, and Zaida. I let them know Bob was coming

to dinner and the movie, though Zaida wasn't permitted to go to the movie because her parents were concerned that it taught 'sorcery and witchcraft'. I'd rolled my eyes because it was *fiction* and we all knew there was no such thing.

"Are you going to the hockey game tomorrow, Fangsu?" Zahra asked.

"Yes. My mom can give you a ride if you need one."

"Yes, please," Zahra said. "I'd ride with Jesse, but I'm not supposed to be in a car with a boy."

"You know those rules are...sorry, never mind," I said.

"I didn't say I liked the rules!" Zahra declared. "Just that is what my parents and my religion teach."

"You'd violate those rules?" Zaida asked.

"Promise not to repeat what I say?" Zahra asked.

"Yes," Zaida said. "All of us do, right?"

Bob, Fangsu, and I all said we agreed.

"I think the rules are from the time of the Prophet and things are very different now. I think the way things were under the Ottomans and the way things are in Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia are the right way. Islam was the strongest faith and had the strongest armies and the best scientists, and then crazy people from Saudi Arabia got control."

"I'm not sure," Zaida said. "Shouldn't we do things the same way the Prophet, peace be upon him, did?"

"He didn't have indoor plumbing, computers, or airplanes. Should we get rid of all those things?"

"Well, no."

"And you want to be a scientist, too. We should honor the Prophet's teaching, but not emulate everything he did!"

"But he is the perfect example of a man and is to be emulated!"

"Ask your mom about your dad having three more wives and let me know if she agrees!"

Zaida laughed, "I know she doesn't! Birgit's dad has three wives, and he's not even a Muslim!"

"Oh, my dad submits," I giggled. "But to his wives, not any god!"

"Ah, you know the meaning of the word, then," Zaida said.

"Intelligent, well-informed, smoking-hot girl here!" I declared.

Bob laughed, "You left out 'full of herself!'"

I almost said that if he wanted me to be full of HIM, he'd better watch out, but I couldn't say that in front of the girls because they didn't know. We finished our lunches and headed back to class.

 Jesse

While I was walking home, Missy called my mobile phone.

"Mind if I come over and hang out until we go out?"

"Not at all," I replied.

"Cool! See you soon!"

We arrived at the house and I offered Missy a drink, which she accepted. I got her a Coke and myself a Dr Pepper from the fridge.

"What do you usually do after school?" she asked.

"Homework," I replied. "I like to get it done before dinner whenever possible, and that's especially true on Friday afternoon so I can have the rest of the weekend free."

"So I'm interfering?"

"It's OK! If it wasn't I'd have said 'no' when you called me. I don't have much homework to do and I can finish it tomorrow before the hockey game."

"If you're sure," Missy said.

"I am," I said. "What did you want to do while we wait?"

"What did you have in mind?" she asked.

I was tempted to tease, but thought better of it.

"I have a couple of gaming systems, some board games, and decks of cards. I also have movies, or we could go to the main house and hang out with Birgit."

"I'm OK with video games so long as they aren't first-person shooters."

"*Mario Kart*? I have to warn you, I'm pretty good."

"I can play for fun without worrying about winning."

We went downstairs to the Duck's Nest, and I set up the game and handed Missy a controller. She wasn't very good, but she was totally a good sport about it, and seemed to be having fun even though she was wiping out and going off course a lot. We ended up playing for two hours before we put the controllers away.

"I'm going to take a quick shower and change," I said. "You can wait here and listen to music if you want."

Missy smiled, "With your reputation, I expected you to invite me to take a shower, even if you were just teasing."

"OK to be totally serious?"

"Sure."

"I do tease a lot, obviously, but given your reaction to me saying I wasn't interested in a steady girlfriend, I didn't feel it was appropriate to tease you. I hope that doesn't upset you."

"No, I was just surprised."

"I'm curious, but what *is* my reputation?"

"I just hear rumors that you've had lots of girls and they were all very happy, if you get my drift."

"Whatever the truth is, it's better to not pay attention to the rumors."

"You're awfully cagey about that."

"Let me ask you a question," I said. "Assume you *did* shower with me, would you want me to tell my friends or the hockey team or even Birgit that it had happened?"

"Uhm, no, I wouldn't, though I expect Birgit would figure it out."

"Probably. But even so, why would I answer those questions for you?"

"Sorry," Missy said, sounding chagrined.

"It wasn't meant to be a reprimand," I said gently, "just to point out why I wouldn't confirm or deny the rumors."

"OK."

"I'll be back in ten minutes."

I turned and started up the stairs, but Missy called out.

"Jesse?"

"Yeah?"

"I want to," she said. "Shower with you, not, uhm, you know."

I walked back down the three stairs I'd climbed.

"First, until you can actually say it, not just say 'you know', you shouldn't. Second, a shower might lead to 'you know' without you intending it to."

"How?"

"Hormones are strong with everyone!" I intoned in a deep voice.

Missy laughed softly, "Darth Vader?"

"Yes. But I'm not kidding. It's very easy to get excited and do things you didn't intend. And people change their minds. And if there's any chance of 'you know', you have to have had an STI test."

"Brigit made all of us get them right after school started. And all of us went on the Pill, too. I mean, the Girl Gang. And how come you're saying 'you know' when I'm sure you've done it?"

"To be silly," I replied. "But also to make a point that it is silly to be fourteen and think about having sex and not be able to say the words. And you don't even have to use profane words, you can call everything by its technical terms, or use euphemisms, or just say the profane words, which, by the way, aren't profane in this house or my dad's."

"What do you mean?"

"For my dad, the only profane word is 'fair' because it's almost always uttered by people whining that something isn't 'fair', which almost always means they didn't get their way and think they deserved to, despite all evidence or logic to the contrary. There are a few words we don't normally use because they're offensive, but nobody would be in any trouble. We'd just be asked to be more careful with our language."

"Like?"

"My moms do not like the word 'bitch' when applied to girls," I said. "And of course the 'N' word for black people, and the 'C' word for girls, even when referring to anatomy."

"And you didn't say them now."

"It's better to simply never use them, even in a conversation about them, because the last thing you want to do is say them at the wrong time or to the wrong person. I'll make you a deal, OK?"

"What?"

"Ask me again on Wednesday when we meet for cocoa and be able to say what it is you don't want to do."

"Wait, is this like *Risky Business*?"

"Exactly! If you can't say it, you can't do it! Or not do it! Back in ten minutes!"

 Steve

"Dad, do you have a minute?" Birgit asked from the door to my study.

"I give two minutes for you and your enormous ego!" I replied, trying, but certainly failing, to sound like Ricardo Montalban.

"And you know what happened to him!" Birgit said, her eyes narrowing. "He blowed up real good!"

I laughed, "Since when did you start watching *SCTV*?"

"Albert chose those discs from Netflix! They're absolutely hilarious!"

"They are," I agreed. "What can I do for you?"

She stepped into the room with a *very* nervous looking Philip.

"Is it OK if Philip spends the night?" she asked.

I wondered if the poor boy had *any* idea what he was in for. I obviously had no firsthand knowledge, but Birgit was so very much like Kara, and she certainly talked a good game, which, I was positive, was actually tame compared to the reality!

"You know that's up to you so long as you follow the rules," I said.

"He's had an STI test, and it was clean" Birgit said. "You know I take my pills religiously."

"Then have fun," I said.

"Thanks, Dad!" Birgit exclaimed.

She grabbed a dazed Philip's hand and led him from my study. One thing was certain, that young man's life would not be the same by Saturday morning. About twenty minutes later, after the kids had left for their Friday evening activities, Kara, Jessica, Yuriko, Natalie, and I sat down to dinner. Suzanne didn't join us, as she was out with the Coven, which was the norm for Friday night.

"What are we doing with the house empty and all to ourselves?" Kara asked.

"I vote for a sauna," I said. "With four beautiful women!"

"Without objection, so ordered!" Natalie declared.

"Hang on," I chuckled. "You've decided to go into politics?"

"Ugh, no! We had to watch C-SPAN for my political science elective. I'd rather have hot slivers of iron shoved under my fingernails!"

"I hear you on that one. The last time I watched was the so-called debate for the Authorization for Use of Force and I wanted to vomit. The only thing worse I've seen were the Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas hearings. The ridiculous posturing, especially by Senator Kennedy, turned me off on the whole process."

"Changing back to tonight, what about after the sauna?" Kara asked.

"I'll make tea and we can listen to music and talk," Yuriko suggested.

"Sounds good to me," I said. "Birgit will be having an overnight guest tonight."

"Philip?" Kara asked.

"He looked like a deer caught in headlights when Birgit asked me if it was OK."

"She asked?!" Jessica said, sounding surprised.

"For Philip's benefit, I'm sure," I replied. "He's twenty, and I'm positive he was concerned about how we might react to him being with Birgit. My thought was the poor boy has no idea what he's in for!"

The girls all laughed.

"Having his mind blown!" Natalie declared with a smirk. "Not to mention something else!"

"I only mentioned it so nobody is surprised if he shows up for breakfast tomorrow. I'll be out with the guys, then at Jesse's hockey game."

"Now that sets up an interesting dilemma for the Empress of the Universe," Natalie observed. "Cuddle time with dad or staying in bed with her paramour!"

"Dad wins, every time," Kara grouched. "EVERY TIME!"

"I thought the Birgit versus Mom war was over," I said. "Did I miss something?"

"No," Kara said. "It's just annoying that even after you turned down her request, she *still* thinks you walk on water!"

"Birgit is not the only one who worships Steve," Jessica interjected. "The two young women in this room who are not his wives do as well!"

"Perhaps," Natalie replied with a smile.

"He is the perfect man!" Yuriko interjected. "But he is also a man!"

We all laughed.

"Well said!" Kara declared.

 Jesse

"I'm sorry you can't come to the movie," I said to Zaida. "We can walk you home before we head to the theatre."

"I think my parents might be unhappy with a gang of twenty-five kids outside the house!"

"How about Zahra and me," I suggested. "That way, you aren't alone with a guy, and the girl is a Muslim? That shows proper respect to your parents."

"It does! Thank you!"

"Birgit," I said to my sister, "we'll meet you at the theatre in about fifteen minutes."

"OK," she agreed.

Zaida, Zahra, and I started walking towards her house, which was just off the university campus, while the rest of the gang headed to the movie theatre.

"How do you know so much about Islam?" Zaida asked.

"The same way Birgit does," I said. "Mostly from our friends from Saudi Arabia who lived here, but also we learned about it in Sunday school, and from my dad."

"They actually teach you about Islam in a Christian church?"

"Yes, of course! The Orthodox had a fairly good relationship with most Arab countries until the twentieth century. There were many Orthodox Christians in the Middle East and Turkey, but the migration and population exchange seriously reduced the numbers. Three of our Patriarchs are in that area -- the Patriarch of Antioch, though he's in Damascus, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, which you call Istanbul. There's also the Coptic Patriarch, sometimes called the Pope, in Alexandria, Egypt. And, of course, we have churches and monasteries across the entire region."

"Most Americans don't seem to know anything about us and they think we all support the terrorist bin Laden."

"I know better," I replied. "As does my family. My sister actually told off the FBI when they harassed our Saudi friends."

"Birgit did that?" Zaida asked.

"Yes. Ask her about it. She'll tell you!"

"Birgit is very outspoken!"

"No, really?" I teased. "I never noticed!"

Both girls laughed.

"I don't think I could bring her to my house," Zaida said.

"I think you're mistaken," I countered. "She spent quite a bit of time at Fatimah's house, wore a scarf, and was properly respectful. She also went to a wedding at a mosque."

"No way!" Zaida exclaimed. "Birgit?!"

"Yes. Seriously, ask her about it."

"Think about what she did when Troy pulled off my scarf," Zahra said. "And what she threatened to do to him!"

Zaida laughed softly, "I remember. It was very rude!"

"And so was removing Zahra's scarf," I said. "I know the rules and that except for your closest male relatives, nobody should see you without a scarf except your husband, and after that, your children. It's not our tradition, but nobody should belittle you for wearing a scarf any more than they should me for wearing my baptismal cross."

"I've never seen it," Zaida said.

"Because, like your hair, it's not meant to be seen," I said as we reached her house. "It's inside my t-shirt, next to my skin, to remind me and to be a symbol to me."

"Thank you for explaining and for understanding. See you next week!"

She went into the house and Zahra and I turned to walk towards the movie theatre. Zahra's hand brushed mine, and I shifted my next step slightly to the left to avoid accidental contact, but it happened again and I didn't shift. When it happened a third time, I did what I was sure she wanted and took her hand.

"Jesse," she said quietly, "if you show me your cross, you can see my hair."

There was NO doubt in my mind what that meant. It would be out of character for her to use the words that spring to mind, but saying she wanted to show me her hair was a clear invitation to have sex that was as clear as saying 'I want to fuck'. I debated challenging her, but she had clearly thought about it and had made an offer. The only correct course of action was to verify her understanding and ensure she knew the rules.

"You know I can only marry a Christian girl, right?"

"And you know I can only marry a Muslim man."

"Do you know the rules for what you asked?"

"Birgit gave me a copy of a book that would give my father a stroke if he knew I'd read it!"

"It would give most dads of teenage girls a stroke! Which is exactly the point of the book!"

"I am untouched by any man, and I have not had any medical procedures, so there is no risk, but I understand from Birgit it's an absolute requirement. Did you know she encouraged all of her friends to be tested at the start of the school year?"

"I did, but I thought it was the Girl Gang, not her school friends."

"Fangsu and I are part of the Girl Gang now, but Zaida is not. Her parents are much more strict than mine, and Fangsu's parents are very open-minded compared to Zaida's and mine. But she told us before that, and both Fangsu and I went to the clinic for the test, which was clean, of course."

She opened her purse and handed me a familiar envelope. I looked at the form and handed it back.

"I would love to see your hair," I said with a smile.

"I know you are busy. When?"

"Tomorrow my hockey team is having a party, and Sunday is our Hangout. What about a week from tomorrow? In the afternoon, after hockey?"

"Yes," Zahra replied, squeezing my hand.

 Birgit

"What did you think about the movie?" I asked Philip as we left the theatre.

"It had more action and was darker than *Philosopher's Stone*," Philip said, using the correct name for the movie, not the silly change to *Sorcerer's Stone* in the US.

"Did you like it?"

"Yes! The book was better, but I think books are almost always better. And at almost three hours, they had plenty of time to tell the story correctly."

"I think it was only about ten minutes longer than the first movie," Philip said.

"But I agree. You couldn't tell the story in one of those ninety-minute movies."

"Let's skip the ice cream," I suggested, taking his hand.

He didn't resist, so I let Jesse know we weren't going to Oberweis, then began walking home. We were wearing gloves, but I guessed Philip's pulse was racing, and I was sure he was nervous, but I was positive that wouldn't be a problem. I knew he might be on a 'hair-trigger' as Aunt Bethany's book called it, but I had the perfect solution for that problem!

Ten minutes later, we walked into the house, which was quiet, except for soft Japanese music playing from the Indian room. We took off our hats, coats, gloves, and shoes, and walked past the mostly closed door to the Indian room, then up the stairs, and into my room. I turned on the light, closed, and locked the door, then turned on the stereo on a cool jazz station I liked.

I didn't want to scare Philip, but I felt I had to take the lead, and thought about the best approach, and almost laughed when I realized what that was.

I smiled and said, "I don't know how to properly use a sword, and if I wanted to learn, you'd teach me how and we'd practice until I became good at it. Well, in this case, I know how you should use your sword and I can teach you! Will you let me? I promise to be gentle!"

Philip laughed, which was what I'd hoped would happen.

"Isn't the guy supposed to say that?"

"Yes, but you're the virgin and I'm the experienced one, so role reversal! And I promise an amazing night!"

"You don't have to sell me on it," he said with a smile. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Sorry!" I said, stepping closer to him.

I put my arms around him and turned my face up for a kiss. Our lips touched, then our tongues, and we had our first truly sexy kiss. We kissed for a minute, then I broke the kiss and stepped back.

"Have you ever seen a naked girl before?" I asked sexily.

"Er, no; well, on TV or in a movie."

"Would you like to?"

Philip laughed nervously and nodded. I smiled, and pulled off my fuzzy sweater, revealing the sexy, black lace bra I'd put on in anticipation of undressing for Philip. I sat down to remove my socks, then stood up and unbuttoned my jeans, pulled down the zipper, and then pushed them down, revealing sexy black lace panties.

"What do you think so far?" I asked with an inviting smile.

"Urk, er, uhm, you're hot!" Philip said, his eyes fixed on my body, which was now clad only in my bra and panties.

"I know!" I said with a wink.

I reached back and unhooked my bra, crossed my arms to push the straps off my shoulders, and let it fall away, revealing my pert breasts, my nipples already hard in anticipation of what we were soon going to do. Philip's eyes went wide, and he swallowed hard, having seen his first breasts, and perfect ones at that!

I tossed the bra aside, then hooked my fingers in my black lace panties and slipped them off, showing off my neatly trimmed V of pubic hair, which pointed to my labia which guarded the entrance, and which were already slick with my juices. Philip gulped audibly and his gaze fixed on the object of his now obvious desire, though I felt I had to do something else first.

"Your turn," I said with anticipation.

Philip fumbled with the buttons of his long-sleeve Oxford, so I stepped forward, gently moved his hands aside, and deftly unbuttoned his shirt, then pulled the tail out of his jeans. Next, I unbuttoned the cuffs, then helped him take off the shirt. Philip stood motionless, so I tugged his t-shirt from his jeans and pulled it up, but he was too tall for me to completely remove it. Philip got the point, and pulled it over his head and off his arms, then dropped it onto the floor.

He was in decent shape, though not toned the way I was, but he had hair on his chest, which I found sexy. I smiled, kissed him, then unbuttoned his jeans, and drew down the zipper. Together we took them off, and I saw the outline of his obviously raging erection, and just had to see it, so I slipped my fingers inside his

boxers and pulled them down, revealing something I hadn't considered -- he was HUGE.

"Wow!" I breathed in appreciation. "You're big!"

"Uh, it gets that way!" he said nervously.

"I mean compared to other guys," I said.

I took his hand and led him to the love seat, and had him sit down. I knelt in front of him, looked up, and smiled.

"I want you to last," I said. "So, I want to do this first.."

I grasped his throbbing shaft with one hand, opened my mouth, and took his large, purplish glans into my mouth. I swirled my tongue, sucked gently, stroked twice, and as I expected, Philip groaned and cum shot out of his dick into my mouth. The pulses came fast and furious, and seemed as if they'd go on forever as I stroked, sucked, and licked.

When the jets finally subsided, I swallowed, then took him further into my mouth and sucked hard. Philip groaned loudly, so I bobbed a few times, then released him and licked his glans clean. I wondered if I could get him completely in my mouth, but that was a question to be answered later.

I climbed into his lap, put my arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. When he didn't protest, I gently pressed my tongue into his mouth and touched his. As our tongues twirled, Philip put his hand on my breast and gently caressed it, sending shivers through my body. We kissed for several minutes, then I broke the kiss, stood up, and took his hand. I led him to the bed, climbed in, and patted the mattress next to me. Philip got right in and turned on his side to face me.

"I want you to kiss me all over," I said. "Suck on my nipples, lick my pussy, and put your tongue in me."

"I, uhm, don't know what to do."

"Yes, you do," I encouraged him. "Use your mouth and tongue, and suck gently on each nipple, then kiss me between my legs, put your tongue in me, and suck gently on my button. You'll find it easily! Make me cum, then we'll do it!"

Philip took a deep breath, let it out, and lowered his head to my boob, tentatively touching my nipple with his tongue. It felt SO good, and I put my hand on the back of his head to encourage him. After a few licks, he opened his mouth, closed it around my boob, and sucked. It felt awesome, and I moaned in anticipation of his tongue being inside me.

Philip sucked and licked my right nipple for a minute, then switched to my left one to do the same thing. Again, after a minute, he lifted his mouth, but this time he moved between my legs and tentatively planted a kiss right at the point of my pubic hair, just at the spot where my labia joined. He planted a second kiss, and then I felt his tongue on my pussy lips.

It took a few minutes of trial and error, but Philip found my button and I gently bucked my hips to increase the pleasure. He'd been careful at first, but after a bit, he really got into it, and his tongue danced over my clit, bringing me closer and closer. I wanted him in me SO bad that I tweaked my nipples to push me over the edge, groaning as extra juices covered Philip's face, dripping down his chin.

I encouraged him to move beside me again and grasped his already hardening shaft. I decided the best course of action was for me to fuck him the first time, so I gently pushed him onto his back, then moved down so I could suck him a bit.

In a flash, he was rock hard, so I straddled him, grasped his shaft, and rubbed it along my slick pussy lips. When it was coated with my juices, I position it at my opening, then slowly lowered myself onto him, his long, thick, hard dick filling me perfectly, and getting SO deep. I was wet enough that I didn't need to lift up before taking what had to be close to seven inches of hard dick into my pussy, with me groaning deeply as our pubic hair meshed together.

I put my hands on Philip's chest and began moving, back and forth at first, then leaning forward to kiss while I moved up, down, backwards, and forwards. I was so excited that it didn't take long before I moaned into Philip's mouth as my pussy spasmed around his dick. That happened three more times over the next ten minutes before Philip tensed, groaned, and blasted hot, sticky cum deep inside me. That was enough to set me off a fifth time, as I ground against him while his shaft twitched and pulsed.

Our first coupling completed, I carefully lifted off, moved next to Philip, and rested my head on his chest, one arm and one leg thrown over him, both of us breathing hard. We lay together for about ten minutes before I moved down to use my mouth to get him hard again. I'd timed it perfectly, and Philip grew hard almost as soon as my mouth was around his glans. This time, I turned on my back and encouraged him to move between my legs, which he did.

"Put it in me," I whispered invitingly.

Philip struggled a bit to figure it out, so I helped him guide himself into me, then pulled him down on top of me.

"Fuck me," I whispered.

He began moving, a bit clumsily at first, but he figured it out after a dozen or so strokes, and that's when I wrapped my arms and legs around him and began moving.

"Fuck me hard!" I demanded.

He began moving a bit faster and his strokes were harder, but he still seemed cautious.

"HARDER!" I growled, throwing my hips up forcefully.

Philip got the point, and I got his point, and we began fucking *hard*. He'd cum twice already, and happily it took more than ten minutes before he came, pushing deep inside me as I ground against him, bringing myself off for the third time in this round, thoroughly enjoying the feel of his cum bathing my insides.

When he moved off me, I cuddled close and considered what to do next. I wanted to sixty-nine, but I wasn't sure how he'd react, given he'd cum inside me twice. I decided I'd save that for the next time, and simply repeated our first round where I sucked him hard, then rode him. After that, we repeated the second round, and this time he had the hang of it and fucked me hard, driving me into the mattress as I thrust my hips upward hard enough that if my legs weren't wrapped around him, I'd have bucked him off.

Happily, he could go twice more, cumming a total of seven times -- once in my mouth and six times in my pussy. After the sixth fuck, I reached over, turned out the light, and pulled the duvet over us. I snuggled close, my head once again on his chest, and an arm and leg thrown over him, with his arm around me.

As I was falling asleep, he kissed the top of my head and said, "I love you, Birgit."



November 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

When I woke on Saturday morning, I wasn't quite sure what to do. Philip had surprised me by saying 'I love you', and Ashley's warning had rung in my ears. I hadn't responded, pretending to be asleep, because I feared I had fallen into a trap. Ashley had warned me about talking to him first, and I'd been so determined to fuck that I hadn't done that.

A bigger dilemma was that it was almost time for me to meet Dad in the sunroom for our morning cuddles, but I realized that it would be rude to leave Philip and go downstairs to cuddle Dad. I almost laughed at the thought of doing that without showering to tease Dad, but that was a really dumb idea. Forgoing cuddles was the only proper thing to do, as much as I hated that idea.

The question now was what to do next. If Philip believed that we were a couple, that would create a huge problem, given I'd agreed to see Bob on Sunday afternoon and we were going to try out my new toy. Doing that, if Philip thought we were a couple, would be tantamount to cheating, something Dad seriously frowned on. Not doing it would upset Bob, and I didn't want to do that.

Bob totally agreed we were simply 'fuck buddies', so he wasn't the problem. And, if I was honest with myself, Philip wasn't the problem, I was. Or, rather, what Suzanne, Natalie, and Katy called my 'headstrong' ways. I reprovved myself because I'd done what I'd wanted without thinking through the ramifications. It seemed to me that if I didn't agree with Philip to be a couple, I'd hurt him badly, which was also something I didn't want to do.

I had an ultimate out, of course, and that was my impending trip to Sweden in about eighteen months, but that was, all things considered, a long ways away. I wondered if I could use that to finesse the situation. Of course, thinking about

that made me remember I'd, in effect, promised Kjell I'd live with him when I was an exchange student, and I hadn't told him that I'd changed my mind.

I needed to talk with someone, probably several someones -- Katy for sure, but also Natalie, and maybe Yuriko. All of them would give good advice. So would Ashley, but the last thing I wanted was to hear 'I told you so' from my baby sister! That would be even more annoying than hearing it from Jesse!

Philip stirred and, knowing I couldn't resolve the dilemma, I succumbed to my desire, slid down, and began giving Philip a 'good morning' blowjob. He was quickly hard, and sensing he was fully awake, I mounted him and began riding him, gently at first, but then with abandon. As I had the previous night, I bent down to kiss him and fucked him hard, bringing myself off three times before he came.

We had a second round, with Philip fucking me hard before we got out of bed and I led him to the shower where I gave him a blowjob before we got out of the shower, dried off, and dressed. I asked him to help me change the sheets on the bed, which he did, and then I lit a scented candle to counteract the obvious smell of sex in the room. That accomplished, we went downstairs to have breakfast.

XLIX. Another Fine Mess

November 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I don't believe it!" Kara exclaimed when she came to the sunroom on Saturday morning.

"She's your daughter, so you tell me which she'd prefer -- sex or cuddling with Dad!"

"She'd prefer sex with Dad!" Kara countered.

"Yes, but given that was not and is not an option, which do you think?"

"She's annoying!"

I laughed, "Come cuddle me, Senior Wife!"

Kara quickly walked over and got into the chaise, and snuggled close.

"You do realize that being annoyed is on you. Think about how I handle Jesse and Albert in that regard. And what we told Birgit for years about Jesse!"

Kara sighed, "That if she let him get to her, it only encouraged him."

"That's right. So don't let her get to you. I know she can be smug and annoying, but at breakfast yesterday, she caught herself a few times and held her tongue."

"I bet she didn't last night!"

I chuckled, "I don't think you could find a surer bet than that!"

"Hi, Pops!" Jesse said, coming into the sunroom. "Ready to go?"

"Yes, is Albert ready?"

"Yes. Isn't that supposed to be Birgit cuddling you, not Aunt Kara?"

"Your sister had an overnight guest."

"Wow! And that canceled your cuddle time? The end of the world must be nigh!"

Both Kara and I laughed.

"This is where I demand two more minutes and get three, right?" Kara asked.

"If you want," I said.

"It's OK," she replied.

She reluctantly got up, and then I stood up. We hugged and kissed, then the boys and I went to the driveway to get into my BMW, where Jesse had already stashed his gear so that we could go straight to the rink from Men's Breakfast.

"Pops, can I ask you a question about Islam?" Jesse asked as I turned onto the Dan Ryan to head for the Bucktown Bistro.

"I'll do my best to answer, and if I can't, you could call Imam Iqbal."

"What is the Islamic view on sin?"

"Similar to Christians, in that there are multiple schools of thought, and Islamic jurisprudence is not monolithic. Why are you asking?"

"Sex before marriage."

"According to Imam Iqbal, and his school of thought, it's not all different from the Orthodox position. With regard to repentance, there is no confession in Islam, except privately to Allah. In fact, revealing one's sin is, in and of itself, a sin. Forgiveness depends on Allah's mercifulness."

"I have the picture that Mr. Kahn would have seen it as a blood insult."

"Mr. Kahn would have seen ANYTHING to do with Fatimah as a blood insult!"
Albert interjected.

"That's as much cultural as anything," I said. "According to Imam Iqbal, cultural influence is very strong with Saudis and Afghans, though all Muslims tend to be very conservative, even prudish. But you know that wasn't always true, right?"

"Yes, especially in the Ottoman Empire. Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia aren't nearly as conservative as Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan, and before 1980, Tehran and Beirut were modern, Western-style, cosmopolitan cities. The Iranian Revolution and Lebanese Civil War put an end to both of them."

"Don't Muslim men want to marry a virgin?" Albert asked.

"Yes," I agreed. "But the way things work, she isn't required to reveal that she's not, and you both know that girls who are sixteen or older only very rarely have an intact hymen of any kind. Yes, some do, but it's exceedingly uncommon. So she simply demurs, and when the Imam asks at the wedding ceremony, she

remains silent, and her silence is accepted as there being no impediment. And no accusation post-marriage carries any weight."

"Thanks."

I wondered why Jesse was asking, but it was, for the most part, none of my business. That said, I knew there were a pair of Muslim girls who hung out with Birgit, and being able to put two and two together, I decided to say something, lest Jesse find himself in seriously hot water with another parent.

"Just be careful," I said.

"Always, Pops!"

"Do you need anything for your party?"

"No. The moms bought everything, and it's stashed in the refrigerators at the Compound. Everyone is chipping in for pizza, which will be delivered about 6:00pm. We'll use the sauna, but with weekend rules. You'll be home, right?"

"Except for my afternoon karate class, yes. Yuriko agreed to stay to help chaperone while I'm out."

"She manages the house," Albert observed. "So nothing new there!"

"It's going to be very different when she goes home after she finishes her Master's degree," I said.

 Birgit

After breakfast, I asked Natalie to give Philip a ride to the L, and she agreed. That meant I wouldn't have to rush to get to karate, and also would give me time

to talk to Natalie. Fortunately, Philip had mostly been quiet during breakfast, at least partly because he was uncomfortable with my moms being there and knowing we'd had sex. When we got to the L, I got out, hugged Philip, gave him a kiss, and said I'd see him on Friday.

"I think I messed up," I said when I got back into the car.

"How so?" Natalie asked as she put my mom's BMW into gear.

"Last night, after we finished fooling around and were about to fall asleep, Philip said 'I love you'."

"And you don't feel the same way about him?"

"No. I mean, I like him, but I don't love him, and..."

"And?"

"I think he considers us to be a couple now."

"And you don't want to be a couple."

"No, I don't."

"And Philip doesn't know that, does he?" Natalie asked.

"No. He's never had a girlfriend before. Last night was his first...sorry. I shouldn't say that."

"I think I see the problem. You didn't discuss what it meant beforehand?"

"No," I said ruefully. "I should have, but I didn't."

"You need to have a conversation with him," Natalie said. "And you shouldn't be with anyone else until you do."

"But I have plans with Bob tomorrow!" I protested.

"You know what your dad says -- nobody can commit irrevocably to sex."

"But...never mind."

I had put myself in a bad spot, and no matter what I did, someone was going to be upset. I really wanted to be with Bob because we were going to experiment with my toy, and I couldn't see Philip doing something like that anytime soon. But if I did that, and Philip thought we were a couple, and he ever found out, it might crush him.

"May I say something that might upset or annoy you further?" Natalie asked.

"I suppose," I reluctantly agreed.

"When I pursued your dad, and yes, I pursued him, he was very clear about what he could and couldn't provide. It worked out better than I thought it might, because I thought it would only be while we were in Russia. But the key is, he made sure I understood before he even kissed me. And I know from other girls, he talks them half to death to make sure they aren't misunderstanding him. He made one mistake in that regard, though I don't know if you're aware."

"No. And I'm going to guess you can't tell me."

"No, it would have to be your dad or the woman who revealed that. But my point is, you needed to be clear with Philip before you dragged him into your bed."

"Ashley said that," I admitted.

"She has a lot of wisdom for someone who's eleven, but she's also not driven by hormones the way a certain young woman in this car is!"

"But I never said I'd be his girlfriend!" I protested.

"No, but put yourself in the shoes of someone who is not immersed in the milieu of the Compound, or is a close friend of your dad's. I know your friends want to have boyfriends. That doesn't mean they wouldn't have sex just for fun."

"Jesse has had trouble that way," I allowed. "Girls who wanted to be a couple."

"Because that's the norm in our society, and unless someone buys into your dad's philosophy, that's what you need to expect them to believe."

"But nobody should assume!"

"Birgit, don't you think that the typical girl who agrees to sleep with a boy expects more from it than just orgasms? Not even all your siblings agree with your dad's philosophy."

"Matthew and Stephe?" I asked.

"Those were the two I was thinking about. I'm not criticizing you for your choices with regard to sex partners, just that you need to consider whether the other person thinks it's just for fun, rather than a statement about your relationship."

"Can I ask if you were ever with anyone besides my dad?"

"You can, and I was with my boyfriend during the time your dad and I weren't physically intimate. And when things end between your dad and me, which will most likely be when I go to Russia to get my Master's degree, I won't sleep with anyone who isn't willing to enter a committed relationship."

"I'm confused," I said. "Dad obviously sleeps with other girls. Why didn't you insist on the same thing from him? Or why not stick to your idea of a committed relationship?"

"I made a conscious decision to set aside what I'd believed about sex because of how your dad treated me and what I felt he could offer me, which was exactly what I needed. In other words, he fulfills a need I have, so I weighed and balanced my options, and chose to enter into that relationship. That said, I think, for me, long-term, the best solution is to be in a committed, exclusive, monogamous relationship.

"And guess what? You think so, too, just as Jesse does. And Albert. And Stephie. And Matthew. I can't say what Ashley or Michael will do because they're both very quiet and circumspect, and because they haven't hit puberty the way the rest of you have. But even before that, both Matthew and Stephie were convinced they'd have a single partner for life. You weren't. Jesse kind of was, because of Francesca, but who knows what would have happened if her mom hadn't lost her mind."

We arrived home, which was a good thing, because I had no idea what to say to Natalie and needed more time to think. When I got out of my car, I went into the house and up to my room, and lay down on the bed to consider what to do next.

 Jesse

"Forget about the party with the softball team and focus on the game!" I demanded.

We were in the locker room after the first period, and we were tied 2-2 with Lane Tech, and it could have been worse, given our sloppy passing, weak shots, and careless defense. The thing that had saved us was that we'd had two powerplays and had scored on both of them. Without those, we'd have been a deep hole that would put our undefeated season at risk.

"Jesse is right," Coach Nelson said. "You guys are unfocused and not playing your game. Losing this game puts not just our undefeated season at risk, but our number one seed! Brother Rice is only one game behind us, and St. Rita is one game behind them. And Chicago Latin is only one behind them. Think about the incentive we give Chicago Latin if they can knock us off and possibly pass us in the standings!"

"So, if you want to get the GI Joe with the kung-fu grip, you have to play better!" Freddy declared.

I almost lost it laughing, because I knew what he was implying. We'd watched the movie recently, and the next line was about getting laid, and he was thinking about the softball team.

"What's so funny, Block?" Coach Nelson asked.

"Uhm, I don't think you want to know, Coach. And I don't think you wan't me to say it, either."

"Let's hear it!"

I regretted laughing so hard, but that didn't matter.

"He's quoting *Trading Places*," I said. "Billy Ray says that traders who aren't successful are upset they're losing money, so they won't be able to buy a GI Joe toy for their kid for Christmas."

"And that's funny?"

Foiled! I had hoped to get away without saying the next line, but that wasn't possible.

"No, but next he says that their wives won't want to make love to them, and you can imagine what Freddy was implying."

"I can. And you know my views on that, Men! You are to treat those young women with respect! And no monkey business during the party, either! Do you hear me?"

"YES COACH!" the team replied in unison.

"Good. Then change your t-shirts, rehydrate, and go out there and play OUR game."

"RAH!" everyone yelled.

The second period was much better, and we scored the lone goal to go up 3-2, and then neither team scored in the third period, despite it ending with a Lane Tech powerplay during which they pulled their goalie for a six-on-four attack for the last forty seconds. I was awarded the game puck for saves, and Coach promised we'd work harder on Monday morning because of what had happened during the first period.

After showering, I headed out to meet Albert and my dad so I could get home to set up for the party.

 Ashley

"Well, that's another fine mess you've gotten yourself into!" I said to Birgit after she'd told me what had happened after we returned from karate.

"Seriously? Laurel and Hardy?"

"It fits, doesn't it?" I asked with a silly smile. "But seriously, Birgit, you're acting like a dumb boy driven by testosterone, not a smart girl!"

"You think Dad is driven by testosterone?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea! I was thinking more High School and college boys! You shouldn't be like what they said in *Crimson Tide*!"

"Oh, right, I'm as dumb as a fence post?"

"In this case, you were! I mean, seriously, how did you not see that coming? I even TOLD you that was going to happen!"

"But how did you know?" Birgit asked.

"I think and I know things!" I declared. "But come on, Birgit! An inexperienced guy who never had a girlfriend who you had to practically drag into bed? What did expect to happen?"

"Grrr."

My sister was headstrong and determined, and if she wanted something, she was going to get it, the consequences be damned. If she would just think more and speak and act less, she'd have less trouble, but wouldn't miss out on anything

important. In fact, had she handled things differently with Dad, she might have managed to get what she so badly wanted, though if I was right in my surmise, maybe even that wouldn't have worked.

"You need to stop and think more," I said. "And listen to people who give you good advice! Did you ask Katy or one of your other confidantes?"

"No. I did ask Natalie this morning, but that was after."

"Smooth move, Sis. Real smooth."

"So now what?" Birgit asked.

"Talk to him, of course. But be prepared for him to be very upset. Well, you could also make him your boyfriend, assuming he was at least competent in the sack."

"And what do YOU know about that?" Birgit demanded.

"Zero except what I've read in Aunt Bethany's book and from what you and our moms and dad's girlfriends have said publicly, which is limited. But come on, it's obvious, right? The entire point is to have orgasms! Well, to make babies, too, but I don't think that's something any of us want to contemplate except in making sure it doesn't happen. Was he competent?"

"Yes, and he's hung, too!" Birgit giggled.

"TMI, as Albert says! I did NOT need to know that! But seriously, you were complaining about Peter and worried about Bob, so maybe it makes sense to be Philip's girlfriend until you leave for Sweden. That gives you an out; call it an expiration date."

"But I want to be with Bob!" Birgit protested.

"I want an Oompa Loompa and I want one NOW!" I faux whined.

"You are very annoying!" Birgit groused.

"Maybe so, but I'm right and you know it! You're smart, Birgit! Use your brain on occasion!"

"Grrr!"

She left, and I went downstairs to find Yuriko and see if she needed any help before I went to Chadrima's house to hang out with the 'Stepsisters' during Jesse's party.

 Steve

"Steve-sama, you had a call while you were out," Yuriko said when I arrived home after Jesse's game.

"Who?"

"Bethany-chan. She asked that you please call her."

"Thanks. I'll do that now."

I went to my study where I dialed the Quinns and Tom answered.

"It's Steve, returning Bethany's call. Is it OK to speak to her?"

"Yes. She's going to ask you to speak privately, and I think it's OK."

"Just so we're clear, my position on the book has not changed."

"I'd be shocked if it had," Tom replied. "Let me get her."

A few seconds later, she came to the phone.

"Hi," she said. "Could we meet?"

"Yes, though I have karate and I usually meet with my mentee afterwards. How about after dinner tonight?"

"Is 7:00pm OK?"

"Make it 8:00pm, if that's OK. That's when Jesse's party ends."

"I'll come by then."

"See you at 8:00pm."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, and when I turned, I saw Birgit at the door to my study.

"What's up, Pumpkin?" I asked.

"I missed cuddle time," she said.

"Jesse and Nicholas are setting up for the party, so how about sitting on my lap in one of the wingback chairs?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed.

I sat down and she sat in my lap, pulled up her legs, and snuggled much the way Katt had done for more than twenty years.

 Birgit

"What's the problem?" Dad asked.

"Is it that obvious?"

"To me, yes. Something with Philip?"

"He said he loves me," I sighed. "And I'm not sure what to do."

"And I'm not sure I can help you," Dad said. "Well, not in the sense I can tell you what to do. May I ask when he said that?"

"After," I replied. "Right before we fell asleep."

"And you don't feel the same way?"

"It's complicated," I sighed. "I mean, I like him, obviously, but I think he thinks I'm his girlfriend."

"And don't want to be."

"I want to keep seeing him, but...well, I want my freedom."

"Have you told him that?"

"No," I admitted. "I, uhm, might have missed having that conversation beforehand. Someone said you made a mistake like that where you ended up in a relationship with someone who felt you could give more than you could."

"Someone talks too much," Dad said.

"No, they gave zero details, so I have no idea who it is. I'm sure Ashley knows because she freaking knows everything! It's ANNOYING!"

Dad laughed, "And to think it used to be Jesse simply walking into the room!"

"What-ever!" I retorted.

"You are so much like your mom!"

"What do you mean?"

"You annoy her in the same way Ashley annoys you! But what have I told you about that?"

"I know, but it's different because Ashley doesn't do it to be annoying."

"But you do?" Dad asked.

"Maybe," I admitted. "Mom is, well, a mom!"

"The eternal battle! Sorry I brought her into it. And we'll worry about the omniscient goddess later. Whoever it was who said that to you was, more than likely, referring to something that happened when you were about four."

I thought for a second and nodded, "Michelle, right?"

"Your days as the Neighborhood Watch were not completely wasted!" Dad chuckled.

"What happened?"

"It was, as you say, complicated, but the relationship between your biological mom, your other mom, and me was strained and Michelle felt she had a chance to replace your moms."

"No way! You would never do that!"

"I know you say that, but the circumstances were such that there was a chance that Jessica would have left us, and who knows what might have happened at that point? But the details aren't important. What's important is that I didn't do enough to discourage Michelle's thinking and when I finally did, things went very badly. I do my best to make sure girls know what I can offer and what is possible so as to not have any misunderstandings."

"You mean like with Natalie and Yuriko, knowing that they'll only ever be girlfriends?"

"Yes, though you know our relationship is deeper than just boyfriend and girlfriend, even if it's not the same as with my wives."

"Because of how you define intimacy, right?"

"Yes. And I'm going to guess you and Philip had sex before you became intimate, without an agreement that it was just for fun."

"I never said it was anything more than fucking!" I protested.

"But did you say that it *wasn't* about a relationship? Remember how most people define intimacy."

"Sex."

"Yes. And draw your conclusions from that, taking into account Philip never had a girlfriend before, or even a girl interested in him."

"I know," I sighed. "It's just that I promised Bob something and didn't promise Philip anything."

"Well, without delving into details, you can make promises by your actions, not just your words, even if the promises are only inferred by the other person, and you haven't said anything to deter that inference. As for verbal promises, if I can read between the lines, you promised Bob something to do with sex, and you know my rule there."

"Nobody can commit irrevocably to sex, and nobody can owe anyone sex."

"Yes."

"Would it be cheating to be with Bob tomorrow?" I asked.

"I can't answer that," I replied. "But ask yourself this -- would Philip consider it to be cheating?"

I sighed deeply, "Probably. Otherwise why say 'I love you'?"

"Then I think you have your answer."

"But how can what someone else thinks control what I do?" I protested. "You reject that idea out of hand!"

"There is one concept of which you probably aren't aware. You know my rule on cheating, right?"

"That you would never participate in cheating."

"Actually, now that I think about it," Dad said, "you were with Mikael and I was with Katt, but it wasn't cheating. Why?"

"Permission," I said. "And not just acquiescence. Without permission, it's cheating."

"So would that mean Katt or Mikael controlled what we did? Or would it mean we didn't violate our own principles?"

"But Philip isn't my boyfriend!"

"In *your* mind," Dad said. "But in his?"

"But it's not up to him!" I protested.

"You're right. It's up to you, but, and this is important, if he would think it was cheating, you need to resolve that *first*. Not because he's in control, but because you have integrity."

"You're annoying, too, Dad!" I groused.

"It's one of the best roles dads have," I chuckled. "The opportunity to annoy their children!"

"Uh-huh," I said, rolling my eyes even though he couldn't see it.

"Going back to the point about Michelle, I strongly suspect your goal, even if you never said it aloud, was that once you and I had been together, I'd move into your room."

"Maybe," I replied.

"Be honest, please."

"Yes," I sighed.

"So, forgetting everything else, was I correct in saying 'no' to you?"

"You are annoying," I groused.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'. Your best course of action is simple -- talk to Philip and work it out. Or, obviously, be his girlfriend. Well, assuming he didn't disappoint you, which I'd say is a safe assumption in that he left the house alive."

"Oh, please!" I said, trying to stifle a laugh but failing.

"I can't tell you what to do, Pumpkin. Only you can decide. And now we need to have lunch so we can go to our afternoon karate class."

I reluctantly got out of dad's lap and we went to the kitchen to have lunch.

 Jesse

"Now, if we could just have this party without chaperones!" Tomás said mid-afternoon.

"Been there, done that, had a heap of trouble!" I declared.

"Dude, how much trouble could YOU get into? Seriously, your dad was OK with you have the entire softball team in your sauna naked!"

"Actually, he wasn't, mainly because it showed poor judgment because of the complaints from the parents, the school, and the coach. I didn't *get* in any trouble, but there was negative fallout."

"Yeah, but seeing all these hot chicks naked? Worth it!"

I chuckled, "At some point, you don't notice."

"If you were dead, maybe! Then again, Carolyn, Luna, and Trish are hot enough to get a rise out of a dead man!"

"Just don't embarrass yourself in the sauna!" I chuckled.

"All those chicks in bikinis or one-piece suits? How could I not?"

"Practice," I said with a grin.

"Can I ask you a question without you losing your shit?"

I had a pretty good idea what he wanted and decided to mess with him.

"I'm not my sister's gatekeeper, so do what you want, but just remember, if you do anything wrong, then after she rips your balls off, you'll have to deal with me!"

"How did you know?"

"I'm not a complete idiot," I chuckled. "I've seen you look at her. And not just you! But seriously, you don't want to make her angry, because that will make *me* angry."

"Got it," he said. "You aren't saying 'no'."

"Nope. I'm saying consider the possible outcomes and responses to how you treat her, then decide what to do."

"Mitch is my best friend, and he's seeing Birgit's friend, the Chinese girl, so I thought maybe double?"

"All you can do is ask. Just be polite."

"OK," he said.

"Jesse?" Jazlyn said, coming up to us. "Want to come upstairs and dance?"

"Sounds great!" I said.

She smiled, took my hand, and we headed upstairs. I ended up dancing with more than half the girls on the team, enjoying the slow dances, and getting the idea that several of the girls were available, if I was interested, which I was. But that was not something to pursue at the party, as we were being watched like a hawk by Ms. Jackson, the softball coach.

About an hour before the pizzas were scheduled to arrive, the entire group went into the sauna. It was crowded with just over forty people, meaning a bunch of us had to sit on the floor, because with Coach Nelson and Ms. Jackson there, sitting on laps wasn't a good idea. I almost laughed at the thought of them using rulers to maintain separation the way Aunt Penny said the nuns had at dances when she was in High School.

Tomás hadn't been wrong about the female flesh on display, though because of the 'Weekend Rules' which were in force, it wasn't anything like the previous time when I'd been in the sauna with the softball team. I had lots of practice, so it

wasn't a problem for me, but I noticed several of the guys with their hands placed strategically.

Later, after everyone had cycled through showers in the basement or the room off the kitchen, we had our pizza, and then the party broke up, though Mitch, Tomás, and Freddy stayed so we could play video games.

 Steve

I had my karate class, and Avanti and I had gone to a diner on Hyde Park Avenue to have our mentoring session due to Jesse's party. Later, when Jessica's shift ended at the hospital, the entire family except Jesse had gone out to dinner. Bethany arrived just as the party was ending, and we went into my study and in two of the wingback chairs.

"It's your dime," I said.

"I want to bury the hatchet," Bethany said. "And I don't mean in your back."

"That's a relief," I replied. "I don't like how things have been between us for the last few years, basically since our most recent trip to Iron Mountain. I want you to answer the question you refused to answer that day. I think the answer will clarify if we're going to make any progress."

"You mean about our first time?"

"Yes. Did I rape you when we engaged in intercourse in the apartment back in Milford?"

"No."

"And you believe that? You're not just saying that because you think it's what I want to hear?"

"Will you do something for me, please?" Bethany asked.

"What?" I asked.

"Turn off the defenses and talk to me as your best friend, even if I don't deserve it?"

"Yes, Sweetheart."

Bethany sighed, "You still melt me with that word."

"I've always meant it, and I felt it was the only way to convey my willingness to do what you asked."

"And will you accept I mean it when I say you didn't rape me?"

"Yes."

"May I ask a question?"

"Anything. You know I'll answer if I can and tell you why if I can't."

"Are you still chasing teenagers?"

"First, I never chased anyone except Kara; second, teenager includes college-age girls, and that would appear to be the sweet spot for girls who are interested in me. Younger girls mostly think I'm too old."

"Mostly."

"Just because a girl doesn't think I'm too old doesn't mean she wants to have sex with me. But you know my take on that. Your objections were based on a theory I called, well, to be polite, unsupportable."

"You called it 'bullshit'."

"I did, but I'm trying to be «lagom» in this conversation."

Bethany smiled, "Moderation in all things."

"Yes."

"Including sex?"

"Let's not go crazy with talk of moderation!" I chuckled. "I will agree with you that it would be easy for someone with my age and experience to take advantage of a young woman if you'll agree it's possible for a young woman to want someone older and with experience to guide her through what is, in your words 'a simultaneously confusing, exciting, frightening, and exhilarating stage of life!'"

"Would you admit that you could do everything exactly right from your perspective, and it could still be abusive, even with consent?"

"Yes, though that would mean I failed to make a proper judgment, and you know how I approach those situations. Heck, you experienced it yourself, both the first time, and after Nick. Your number one complaint was that I was *too* cautious and talked *too* much."

"You never did fight fair."

"I subscribe to the theory of combat I first heard espoused by Nick and later by Aimee -- when forced to engage in combat, you destroy the enemy in detail, then go home, have a glass of bourbon, play with your kids, and get laid. Or, as my *Consigliere* modified it for me -- avoid it at nearly all costs, but if you can't, destroy the enemy completely, go home, have a sip of bourbon, and deflower a virgin!"

Bethany laughed, "How is Liz?"

"She and Julius are very happy, and unless I miss my guess, she'll announce the impending arrival of a future lawyer in the not too distant future. She has the glow."

"And the boobs?" Bethany smirked.

"She always had those, and was outside my norm, but I overlooked that flaw."

Bethany laughed, "I think you're the only guy on the planet who would consider a 'nice rack', as the firemen call it, a detriment!"

"So sue me!" I chuckled. "Yours are small and I liked them just fine!"

"You know," Bethany teased, "Tom did say I should do whatever it took to repair our relationship!"

"And you know darn well he didn't mean *that*, and even if he did, that would violate my most important rule, developed back when we were in High School. I haven't forgotten the lesson."

"Being bounced off the hood of Pete's car did get your attention."

"It did, and as desirable as you are, you know why I would have to say 'no'. And that right there should cause you to reconsider your opinion of me."

"Can we continue this conversation without you getting defensive?"

"You're going to ask me about Katt, and I'm going to tell you that Mikael once asked me to father a child for them when they thought he wasn't fertile enough for Katt to get pregnant."

"Seriously?"

"Think about it, Sweetheart. Who is the most fertile, virile man you know? Well, before the operation? And it wasn't as if Katt and I hadn't been together, AND it wasn't as if Mikael didn't know about that. The only other married woman I've been with is my Italian friend, Elena, who I haven't seen in some time. And her husband was entertaining their *au pair* when I spoke to him to confirm what Elena had told me.

"All that said, you aren't serious because you disagree with my sexual ethics. And we can disagree, so long as you acknowledge that my expression of my sexuality, and my kids' expression of their sexuality, and the cousins' expression of their sexuality, are up to each individual. That's true of you, too, though as with me, you need to honor the commitments you've made to your spouse."

"May I ask a blunt question and get an answer?" Bethany inquired.

"Birgit asked, and I turned her down flat. She was unhappy, but accepted it. Of course, that hasn't stopped her from teasing me, but the teasing isn't serious, if you know what I meant."

"Just be careful."

"There is zero risk," I said. "Birgit knows the answer was a firm 'no', and that's actually given her license to tease a bit more than she might otherwise. She and I actually had a good talk today about sexual ethics. I've had that conversation with Jesse, too. He and I have a clear agreement, and Birgit and I have one, but it's never been expressly articulated."

"Mind if I ask?"

"That I would never, under any circumstances hit on their friends or do anything that would make their friends uncomfortable. And Jesse has told at least one girl that she was free to decide for herself, but then he'd stop sleeping with her. He teased me by saying if she wanted to slum that far, it was her business, but then they would only friends, with no benefits."

Bethany laughed, "That does sound like him. And 'Little Miss Coupons'?"

"In the past, she was amused by her friends wanting me, but I get the picture that nearly all of them have decided I'm too old. As for the others, I would never make a move of any kind, or even flirt or tease. They'd have to come to me and have an adult conversation. And even then, there is no guarantee I'd say 'yes', and the default for girls under seventeen is 'no'."

"But not the final answer."

"I'm not going to lie to you or try to blow smoke up your skirt. What I am doing is saying the same thing I have for more than two decades -- I follow the rules of consent you and I agreed in High School, and I won't countenance anyone who is immature. I'm a pretty good judge of that, too."

"You know what the law says."

"The law says a lot of things," I replied. "I know there are areas where YOU disagree with the law. And let me point out something that is a contradiction you've been living with for the past five years even if you haven't admitted it."

"What's that?"

"You are all for bodily autonomy for girls fifteen and up to have abortions, as well as to obtain birth control. But the minute they want to have sex with someone outside your definition of 'acceptable', they no longer have bodily autonomy. And you were effectively arguing that no girls Jesse's age could consent to having sex with him because of his experience. That contradicts your 'my body, my choice' idea, in that you're saying the girls can't have sex even if they want to and are mature enough to."

"The argument is similar to age of consent laws. They don't make it a crime for an underage girl to have sex, they make it a crime for men to have sex with her."

"Sophistry! The end result is that she's denied bodily autonomy. It would be the same as banning doctors from performing abortions but saying women are free to obtain them!"

"Not quite."

"Yes, quite! It's the same basic argument. Look, I agree there has to be an age limit where there is a presumption of immaturity, and Europe has mostly settled on fourteen or fifteen. Here we have insanity like California where it's eighteen with no exceptions, so a couple who have been having sex, who have sex on a boyfriend's eighteen birthday when the girl turns eighteen two days later subjects to felony charges!"

"You know they'd never prosecute that!"

"So you say, but I've seen plenty of situations where rational people say 'nobody would prosecute that' where the government has landed with both feet on someone because they want to make an example or because they can. I'm not just talking about sex, either. Think about the BS 'lying to the government' charges where saying you didn't break the law when you know you have is not subject to self-incrimination protection AND is subject to prosecution for making a materially false statement."

"I call BS!"

"Talk to Liz. We had this conversation and while there isn't a court ruling on the point, there are rulings which are VERY close. And before you call BS again, Liz gave a concrete example, for a case in 1984. I don't recall the citation, but basically it came down to the fact that if an employee lied on their time or attendance records and, unbeknownst to them, NIKA submits those records, along with those of other employees, to the federal government pursuant to some regulation, the employee could be criminally liable."

"NO WAY!" Bethany protested.

"Every which way," I replied. "She had the citation. Call her and ask. And while we're on the topic of laws, how about the one that effectively prohibits you from providing counseling to someone who engaged in incest or what used to be called statutory rape? If you *ever* discover the identity, which is pretty obvious if someone says they had sex with their sibling or child or parent, you are required to report it on pain of losing your license.

"Consider, this, too -- if you were to write something that denied knowledge, and it found its way to the federal government in some official way, and they discovered you did know the names, you could be prosecuted for providing materially false information. No other consideration matters, even if there was

some kind of state counseling exception. Simply providing inaccurate information is sufficient if they can plausibly claim you knew it was inaccurate."

"Unreal."

"And yet, that is where we are. What's your goal here?"

"Just to try to fix things. Can we agree to disagree with the promise I won't interfere with your kids?"

"Or the cousins?"

"Or the cousins. What about the book?"

"So long as it remains sex-positive, you're welcome to revise it. I have to retain what I'll call 'editorial control', but I won't object to a discussion of power disparity, so long as it doesn't state or imply that it is the sole determining factor, and is presented in a rational way. To be clear, that means it cannot in any way suggest or even hint that Jesse is abusing girls who have consensual sex with him."

Bethany was quiet for a moment, then nodded, "I can live with that."

"Then I agree. I'm glad we could find a way forward, Sweetheart."

"Say that again and I'll throw you down and have my way with you!"

"Whatever you say, Sweetheart!" I replied with a silly grin.

L. Do I Look Stupid?

November 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Is that it, then?" Jessica asked when I explained what Bethany and I had agreed.

"I think it depends on what you mean. Do Bethany and I agree on everything? No. Did we come to a negotiated settlement with which we both can live? I believe so, but only time will tell. I think the revisions she proposes to *Smart Teens*; *Smart Choices* will be the proof that she's come back from her irrational position."

"Were you tempted?" Kara asked.

"No. Bethany and I are far past that at this point, not to mention the problems it would cause with Tom. And, honestly, the last thing Bethany needs is the drama that always came with our physical relationship. I certainly don't need the drama, and I can't imagine the three of you are interested in that in any way, shape, or form."

"That would be a hard 'no'," Jessica said. "I'm too old for that kind of teenage angst."

"Poor baby, she's forty-one and ancient!" I teased.

"You know how grueling the ER is, and even with only working fifty hours a week, some of which is classroom teaching, it's draining. And you know the patient loads are increasing dramatically. EMTALA prevents Cook County from

dumping patients on us, but we still have huge numbers of uninsured patients who use the Emergency Department as if it were their physician's office."

"You don't object to EMTALA, do you?" Suzanne asked.

"It's a good policy," Jessica said. "But they didn't think properly through the ramifications of the policy. So, in the end, while it guarantees you'll be seen, you might end up waiting for more than twelve hours because of the patient load. You've seen the waiting room at the hospital. One simple modification -- one that allowed us to post signs and redirect people to a clinic, rather than the ER, would solve most of the problem. Staffing and running a clinic is far less expensive than staffing and running the ER."

"How are the sessions Steve leads going?" Kara asked. "Neither of you have mentioned them."

"Pretty well, actually," Jessica said. "They've proved what you and Tiger have said for a long time -- primary education is failing, and we're creating graduates who do not know how to engage in proper critical thinking. Oh, they can pass the standardized tests so the government can crow about the 'success', but in the end, they are unprepared for any role in society that requires critical thinking and analysis."

"Which," I said ruefully, "for the most part serves the 'sky is falling', 'think of the children', and 'if we can save just one life' crowd, so I don't expect it to change."

"Do you get hit on?" Suzanne asked.

"Are you kidding?!" Jessica exclaimed, shaking her head. "They know he's my husband and yet they persistently pursue him, even though he makes it clear he's married."

"They don't know about his freedom?" Suzanne asked.

"I certainly haven't said anything, and at this point, almost nobody at the hospital knows anything more than I'm married to Steve. Once we decided to be more circumspect a few years ago, and many of the people who knew retired or left for other hospitals, the number of people at the hospital or the university who know is limited."

"And Allyson?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

Jessica smiled, "Circumspect does not mean never saying anything! She's seen the four of us outside the ER many times. Not to mention she, Lucy, and Sylvia Ochoa are close friends from college."

"Talk about trouble," I chuckled.

"They had a group of about ten girls who met during Freshman year and hung out from then on, though at least one of them was Allyson's friend in High School. From what I gather, they were pretty wild. Almost all of them were Catholic!"

I chuckled, "Frank Zappa was not wrong! Is anyone interested in a sauna before bed?"

My three wives agreed, and we headed to the basement.



November 17, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"I don't know what to do," I said to Katy after I explained everything that had happened.

"Yes, you do," Katy replied. "You know what you *should* do. The problem you have is that it's not what you *want* do to."

"But how can Philip's misunderstanding force me into a committed relationship?!" I protested.

"I don't think anyone is saying that," Katy countered. "I think we're all saying that you need to discuss the situation with Philip before you're with anyone else."

"But I didn't make any commitments!" I protested. "So it wouldn't be cheating!"

"That might be technically correct, but do you want to live your life on technicalities, potentially hurting other people, simply so you can do whatever you want?"

I wanted to say that it wasn't fair, but Katy agreed with Dad on that word, and it would only make the conversation more difficult.

"No," I replied, "but if I take what you say to the logical conclusion, then anyone I'm with controls me!"

"Not at all," Katy replied. "The source of the problem is that you didn't discuss it with Philip. You wanted to get him into bed so badly that you didn't do the most important thing -- agree what it meant. You're the one with experience and knowledge, Birgit. That puts it on you to make sure your partner understands.

"Sex *always* means something, and, if you don't agree in advance, you're asking for trouble. You are, obviously, in control of your body, and you don't owe Philip

or Bob sex, but you do owe them both a conversation. From what you've said, Bob understands he's just a 'fuck buddy' as you put it, but Philip thinks you two are a couple."

"But nobody else thought that!" I objected.

"Are you *sure* about that? You told me you'd changed your mind about living with Karin and her family. Have you told Kjell about that? Or is he still expecting you to be his girlfriend for a year?"

"But I never promised that!"

"But did you imply it? Could Kjell reasonably infer from what you said and what you did that you'd be exclusive with him?"

"Seriously?! Now he's in control?!"

"Take a deep breath, please, and think it through. You said you were going to live with him and sleep in his bed. The message that sends is that you'll be exclusive lovers, unless you made it clear that wasn't going to be the case. Again, you aren't ceding control, but you are creating problems for yourself by speaking and acting rashly. There's a reason your dad has a reputation for talking girls to death before he has sex with them."

"I just think it's wrong that I'm the bad guy here!"

"Do what you want, Birgit," Katy said, "but you have to take responsibility for your actions and be prepared for the consequences."

There really wasn't anything else to say, so I said 'goodbye' and we ended the call.

 Steve

"What are we discussing today?" Jackson asked as he, Suzanne, Natalie, and I relaxed in the sauna after lunch.

"I'd say the upcoming passage of the *Homeland Security Act* which greatly concerns me, and the coming war in Iraq, which concerns me even more. But I don't think we'll find any dissent on those two topics."

"Only minor quibbles, I suspect," Jackson agreed. "The thing is, we've more or less talked every topic to death at this point, and we haven't had much new blood in the group in the past year."

"Tabitha and John, and a new girl named Danielle, will join us in January," I said.

"What about selecting a book for everyone to read?" Jackson inquired. "That was something that was done in the past, right?"

"Right," I said. "What should we read?"

"What about Aesop's Fables?" Suzanne asked. "I saw a book in Borders on Friday -- *The Complete Fables*. We could read and discuss them, and that should last us for a couple of months, if not longer."

"I think that's a great idea," Natalie said.

"I concur," Jackson added.

"Then that's what we'll do," I said. "I have a copy I bought via Amazon.com on one of the bookshelves in my study."

"How have things been otherwise?" Jackson asked.

"Pretty good," I replied. "I'm able to spend most of my time with software development tasks, though I did have to schmooze with an alderman to get our building permits approved. It took a bit of wheeling and dealing, but I think I found a solution. This week I'm spending a few days in Arizona to analyze a company for Dante."

"You're doing business together?" Jackson asked.

"Dante and I always made money together," I replied. "He's decided that being a partner is far more profitable than being a competitor or, worse, an enemy."

"Steve Adams always makes money for his partners!" Suzanne observed.

"So long as I don't end the same way Hyman Roth did!" I chuckled. "I'll be in airports on Wednesday and Friday!"

"What kind of business?" Jackson asked.

"All I can say is healthcare technology," I replied. "I'm analyzing other tech startups for Dante, but the others I'm doing by email and telephone. Also, just for planning purposes, I'll be out of town the weekend of December 6th, as well as December 18th to the 22nd. We'll meet on the 15th for our only December meeting. I think we'll do a holiday party that day, and start with the book in January. I'll make sure Tabitha, John, and Danielle know."

"Who's Danielle?" Jackson asked.

"A college student who's decided she doesn't want to attend Trinity for her M.R.S degree. She'll be moving in with John and Tabitha, will work at Starbucks with Tabitha, then figure out what she actually wants to do with her life. She'll likely go back to school at some point."

"Another Evangelical girl whose faith doesn't survive First Contact with Steve Adams?" Jackson asked.

"This one sought me out because she'd rejected the strictures of her church and was already searching for an alternative spirituality. Going back to Dante, how are things at M & M?"

"Mark and Melissa are very happy you removed the thorn from their flesh, that's for sure! Of course, with the kind of money Holly will make at Spurgeon, I could be a bum and we'd still be in great financial shape!"

"Steve could easily be a kept man if he chose to," Natalie said. "But that's not him."

"It's not me, either," Jackson said. "I really enjoy what I'm doing. That said, knowing I don't *have* to do it is a major plus."

"I'll just have to marry a rich Russian oligarch!" Natalie declared, "I'm sure Lyudmila could introduce me!"

I chuckled, "I'm sure she or Yuri would know of a suitable rich young man."

"Young? No way!" Natalie smirked. "At least ninety and with a bad heart! And with no living relatives!"

We all laughed.

"You'd be OK with having sex with a man that old?" Suzanne asked.

"I sleep with Steve so..."

Everyone laughed again.

"You've been spending too much time with Albert," I chuckled.

"He is hilarious with his 'dinosaur age' comments," Suzanne said.

"Which appear to be restricted to his parents!" I observed. "He doesn't say things like that to any of his adult friends, and certainly never to Grandpa Al! I hate to get out of the sauna, but we should shower before the gang arrives."

 Birgit

"Let me get this straight," Bob said, sounding annoyed. "You were so determined to put another notch in your lipstick case that you didn't consider how it would affect us?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"What the heck drove you to do it? I mean, you appear to enjoy fooling around with me, and I even agreed to play with your new toy. I don't get it!"

I sighed, "I was afraid you and Meghan would become a couple."

"And rather than trust me, or even talk to me about it, you acted impetuously, and now, not only can we not play with your toy, we can't even kiss!"

"What do you mean?! Of course we can! It's up to me!"

"It's also up to me, and Philip is a nice guy. I want to be able to look him in the eye next Friday night without feeling I've betrayed his friendship."

"I never said who!" I protested.

"Do I look stupid?" Bob asked.

"You're upset."

"No, I'm not upset, I'm...disappointed. You basically created a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"Wait! You're going to be exclusive with Meghan?"

"For now, at least. I don't want to be part of your drama."

"Seriously?! My drama?!"

"What exactly do you think is going to happen when you tell Philip he was just another conquest? That you toyed with his heart to get him into your bed? No, thanks. I don't want any part of that. When you get your act together, we can discuss the future. Until then, I'll see you at Photography Club."

"What?!"

"I'll see you on Monday."

He got up and walked out of my room and I sat down on the bed, not knowing what to do.

 Steve

"Uh, oh," I said quietly to Kara, who was sitting next to me at Philosophy Club.

"What?" she asked.

"Bob just came downstairs alone and went to the foyer. I better go check on Birgit."

"Of course," Kara groused quietly.

"If I'm right about what happened, this is my area of expertise," I said as I got up.

I excused myself and went up the stairs and saw the door to Birgit's room open and Birgit sitting on her bed.

"Hi, Pumpkin," I said.

"Hi," Birgit said sullenly.

"Want to talk, or do you want to be left alone?"

"No lecture?"

"No lecture," I confirmed. "You know that's not my style. OK to come in?"

"Yes."

I stepped into the room, closed the door, then sat on the love seat.

"I saw Bob leave basically right after he arrived; want to tell me what happened?"

Birgit sighed, "I explained what happened and Bob accused me of being so determined to get Philip into bed that I ignored any other considerations, and that I basically wanted a conquest, or as he called it, a notch in my lipstick case."

I couldn't help but laugh, then said, "Quoting Pat Benatar was a nice touch."

"It's not funny, Dad."

"Sorry. From the way you're reacting, I'd say he cut you to the quick."

"You mean he caused my conscience to accuse me of doing what he said?"

"Yes. 'cut to the quick' means emotionally affected in a very deep way. What else did he say?"

"That he didn't want to be part of the drama and that we'd only see each other at Photography Club. I caused the very thing I was afraid would happen with Bob, and I'm not sure what to do next."

"May I give you a piece of advice?"

"Yes."

"Don't decide what to say to Philip because you want to have sex with him and don't toy with him. Just be honest with him and take it from there."

"How come you don't have these kinds of problems?" Birgit asked.

"Years of experience," I replied. "But I admitted I had in the past. I should add that Michelle wasn't the only mistake I've made where I didn't think about the meaning of what I was doing. Let me tell you about a girl in Sweden..."

I told her the story of what had happened with Annie Martinsen.

"That sounds almost exactly like what happened with Philip, though it wasn't because he was overly excited. He had his STI test, so he knew what we were going to do."

"Right, I wasn't trying to say it wasn't consensual or done in the heat of the moment, just that Annie and Philip both had the same reactions. I took my lumps with her, and she was very, very upset. I suspect you're going to have similar problems with Philip if you don't want to be his steady girlfriend."

"I don't."

"Then you need to tell him that straight up, and you need to expect him to be upset with you, and possibly never want to see you again."

"I know," Birgit sighed. "I messed up."

"May I ask a question that is totally none of my business?"

Birgit smiled, "Yes."

"What's wrong with Philip that you don't want him as your boyfriend?"

"I don't want to be tied down. Well, unless YOU want to tie me down!"

I laughed, "At least you aren't so depressed that you can't tease your dad. But this is probably not the right time to tease."

"Sorry."

"It's OK. I don't check your social calendar, but is there another guy?"

"No, but there could be."

"Consider your options, and think it through. You have to make your own decisions, but remember, you also have to accept the consequences and deal with the fallout."

"I know. Thanks for coming to talk to me."

"You're welcome."

I left Birgit's room and went back downstairs for the rest of Philosophy Club.



November 18, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Monday, when I went to Photography Club, Bob wasn't waiting outside the classroom as he usually was. I went in and sat down in my usual seat next to him, and I said 'Hi'. He said 'Hi' back, and it seemed as if he didn't want to talk, but it didn't matter because Mr. Tavares came into the room just then.

I had totally messed up with Peter, Bob, and Philip, and it bugged me. Everyone said guys just wanted to get laid and didn't care, but everything that had happened made it clear to me that wasn't *actually* the case. Of the guys, only Mikael hadn't caused any current or even future problems. It was different with Lilibeth, Julie, and Marcella, and there had literally been no problems and there were unlikely to be.

I almost laughed because the *girls* understood it was just sex, with no commitment, but the boys didn't, except Mikael, and that went counter to the stereotypes. Dad had always warned me about basing decisions on stereotypes because while there was often a kernel of truth in them, they were no more reliable predictors than the list of numbers that had come up previously on the roulette wheel.

"MISS ADAMS!" I heard, snapping out of my thoughts.

"Sorry, Mr. Tavares," I said.

"I called your name three times," he said. "If you aren't paying attention, why are you here?"

"I apologize," I said. "I was preoccupied by something personal. I'll pay attention."

"Good. Now, would you please present your photo montage?"

I stood up and went to the front of the classroom and put the poster board on which I'd created my montage of pictures from Sweden onto an easel and described why I'd included each photo. When I finished, I sat down, hoping I'd done well enough not to earn a negative evaluation. It didn't matter in terms of grades, as this was an elective club, but it mattered for me.

After class, I touched Bob's arm, and we went out to the hallway.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Bob said. "But I couldn't not say something."

"I know. Every single person I spoke to agreed with you, more or less."

"Hang on! How many people know?"

"The ones you would expect. My dad, of course, and Natalie, and my friend Katy in Vermont."

"Do you know how weird it is that you talk to your dad about your sex life?"

I smirked, "I'd say he's the world authority on the topic!"

Bob laughed, "I suppose having three wives, two steady girlfriends, and other girls, he might have a clue how to juggle those relationships."

"That's just it," I said. "It's not juggling."

"Yes, but was it *always* like that? Or do you know?"

"No, he admitted it wasn't."

"Sort things out with Philip, then come talk to me. As I'm said, I'm not upset, just disappointed. But also, don't expect me to climb right back into your bed."

"Thanks for not being upset, even though I messed up."

"I think you're a good person, Birgit, but you let what you *want* to do get in the way of what you *should* do. Even the Empress of the Universe has to bend to reality!"

I laughed, "Dad has said the same thing."

"Your dad is pretty smart. I can think of very few people I'd want to emulate, and he's one."

I giggled, "You just want a «ḥarīm»!"

"And your point is?" Bob asked with a grin. "And as if you don't want whatever the male version of that would be!"

"I looked it up, and at least in the Ottoman Empire it was called «selamlık» and women were forbidden from going there. But I also do need to say that even though I used «ḥarīm» to mean the same as the English word 'harem', it wasn't about sex the way it's portrayed in movies and books. It was basically a 'safe space' for women and men didn't go there. I'm not saying it was a good thing, because I'd never go for that, but it wasn't how it's portrayed, nor was it like what the men in Afghanistan or rural Pakistan do with their women."

"You are a font of apparently infinite knowledge, but finite wisdom."

I almost lashed out at him for saying that, but realized what he'd said was basically spot on.

"I'm working on it."

"Good. See you Wednesday."

I left and went to meet Fangsu, Zahra, Zaida, and Missy so we could walk to our house to do homework.

"Birgit, what happened with the FBI?" Zaida asked.

"Uhm, who told you about that?" I asked warily.

"Jesse. He was telling us that you actually respected Muslim values, even if you didn't agree with them."

"The FBI was stupidly treating our Muslim friends as if they were terrorists simply because they were from Saudi Arabia and Mr. Kahn was in Boston on 9/11, and they did that even though he has NO connection to any terrorist group. It was disgusting. The FBI talked to me and I told them off."

And we had it on tape, but I didn't have access to that, because it was locked in Dad's safe, and only Suzanne and my moms had access to it. Well, and Katya, but she'd never betray my dad, even if it meant receiving her 'nine grams'!

"And you went to a mosque?"

"Yes. For the wedding prayers for a woman who works for my dad's company. He served as her sponsor because her dad wasn't available, and she didn't have any other male relatives."

"Your dad was «wali mukhtar»?! No way! He's not Muslim!"

"And yet, the imam at the mosque in Bridgeview approved it. My dad reviewed and approved the marriage contract as well."

"Wow! I've never heard of anything like that, but I suppose living in a Christian country, there are special circumstances. What did you think of the mosque and the wedding?"

"The wedding was fun, but at the mosque, everything was in Arabic except the homily, so I simply stood quietly with the other women and followed them when they knelt or sat."

"And you were OK with wearing a scarf?"

"Out of respect for your tradition, yes, but it's not something I would ever agree to. I wore one when I visited my friend's house, and a few other times, too. Again, out of respect, not because I agree."

"You don't believe in Allah, do you?"

"I don't believe in any gods," I replied.

"So you don't worship at all?"

"Oh, Birgit worships," Missy smirked. "Male anatomy!"

"Missy, please be respectful," I demanded. "We're having a serious conversation."

"Sorry," Missy replied. "I just...no, you're right. Zaida, I apologize."

"It's OK," Zaida said. "Your brother believes, though, right?"

"Jesse does, but Albert is even more adamant than I am. I'm agnostic and lean towards atheism; my dad is agnostic, but leans towards theism; Albert is a strong atheist."

"Your parents never taught you about Allah or 'Īsā ibn Maryam?"

I knew from speaking with the Kahns she meant Jesus.

"Not in the way you mean," I said. "My mom went to a very conservative Christian church growing up, but rejected their teachings as a teenager. My dad grew up Roman Catholic, but rejected their teachings as a teenager. They've explored many things, and that's how Jesse became Russian Orthodox -- he liked it and wanted to go back, and our parents were cool with that."

"So, what happens when you die?"

"I have no idea. It's possible that we live on in some way, but I can't say for sure. And based on that, I believe I have to live my life to the fullest, and impact the world and the people in it, which gives my life meaning. May I say something that might be a bit disrespectful?"

"Yes," Zaida agreed.

"Only a GUY would describe heaven as a place where he had seventy-two eternal virgins at his beck and call! Of course, if that's heaven, my dad is already there! Well, minus the eternal part!"

"Your dad is quite different," Zaida said.

"You can say that again!" I declared.

We reached the house, went inside, took off our hats, coats, and shoes, and went to the sunroom to do our homework.



November 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois



Jesse

"Hi!" Missy exclaimed when we met outside Starbucks.

"Hi! Hot cocoa?"

"Sure!"

We went inside and Tabitha greeted us, took our order, accepted my debit card in payment, and when we got our drinks, we went to sit down.

"I'm curious, but with hockey you can't really work, so do you receive an allowance?"

"Yes. My moms make sure I have enough spending money, and my dad, contrary to the rules he set up, pays for my insurance and gas. The others will have to work to get their spending money and pay for insurance once they turn sixteen, and to buy their own car if they want one."

"That doesn't seem f...uhm what word can I use?"

"Equitable? Just? Equal?" I suggested. "And that's the perfect example of why we don't use that word. 'Fair' implies that treating people in different situations differently is somehow unjust. It's not. And Dad will make an exception for Birgit, too, so she has spending money when she's in Sweden. Dad's point is that it's about responsibility, and understanding that nothing material in the world comes at no cost. And to further that, I'll work when I go to UW Madison, because I plan on playing for the club team, not the NCAA team."

"Why? You're awesome!"

"Think about this -- there are somewhere around sixty full-time goalies in the NHL, drawn from the entire world, though mostly in countries with cold climates. And they range in age from around twenty to around forty. I'm good, but to make it, I'd have to be not only one of the sixty best in the world my age, but sixty best in that entire age bracket. Heck, Albert has better odds given there are around nine hundred Navy pilots who fly from carriers in the twenty-four to forty age group! Granted, not all of those are fighter jocks, but those nine hundred are also drawn exclusively from the US."

"I guess I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Even if I'm the best in Chicagoland, I'm competing against every goalie from Canada, Sweden, Russia, the Czech Republic, Finland, and so on, in addition to the US. I have a much better chance working in a front office or as a scout, and by getting a degree in business, I'll have a wide range of opportunities."

"That seems logical."

"Not to mention the NCAA recruiting rules might bar me from playing."

"How so?"

"Because Mom Two isn't my biological mom or legally married to my biological mom, and provides some of the money for hockey, I'd be disqualified."

"That's dumb!"

"Of course it is, but she's not considered immediate family under their rules. My dad could contribute, and that would be OK, but not Mom Two."

"That has to change."

"Well, if the government got its head out of its butt and allowed them to marry, then it would be OK. But in the end, I think I could fight that and win, but you never know. And as I said, I'm realistic about it. I love playing hockey and I'll play for the rest of my life, but it's not my life."

"What's your dream job?"

"General Manager of an NHL team, but, same problem as being a pro goalie -- only about thirty jobs and the entire world population to compete against! Well, those over about the age of thirty, but still. What about you?"

"No clue. I'm a Freshman, so I have a few years to think about it."

"My guidance counselor said the best approach is to find something you love to do, and do that, because you can't buy happiness."

"Dad says you can rent it!" Missy declared.

I chuckled, "And that cost him a house, a car, child support, and alimony, so I'm not sure about the value proposition there!"

"I'll remember that the next time he makes that comment."

We finished our cocoa, Missy grabbed her bag, and we started walking north, towards our houses.

"Want me to walk you home?" I asked.

"Could we stop at your house?" Missy asked.

"We could. *Mario Kart*?"

"I thought maybe you might need a shower," she said quietly.

"I shower after hockey practice, so I don't think I need one!" I countered.

"OK, so 'need' was the wrong word!" Missy replied, understanding I was teasing her. "I want to, but I'm not ready to have sex."

"We need to agree on a definition of that word," I said. "It means different things to different people."

"Uhm," Missy said, blushing, "screwing is sex, right?"

"Yes, but so is oral, and I suspect if you ask your dad, showering with me and kissing would be 'sex' in his mind."

"I don't care what my dad thinks!" Missy said forcefully. "And he has NO room to talk after cheating on my mom!"

"And you remember what I said about being a couple, right?"

"Yes, but you aren't saying 'never' just 'not now', right?"

"Yes, but with the caveat I'm going away to college in less than two years."

"I remember. You're very careful."

"I do my best to avoid drama, but drama seems to find me, at least on occasion. Also, remember what I said about hormones?"

"Yes."

"So the limit you set is the limit. That way, there are no mistakes. OK?"

"Yes."

 Steve [Aboard an American Airlines flight from ORD to PHX]

"That's a nice looking laptop," my First Class seatmate on the MD-80 observed when I pulled it from my bag after the crew gave permission for electronic devices to be used. "What is it?"

"An Apple iBook G3," I replied. "It's running OSX Jaguar."

"I've never seen one of those before."

"This one was just released at the beginning of the month, but there were predecessors that look like it. Macs aren't nearly as popular as Windows laptops,

but this one can run circles around the Windows laptops AND has a version of Unix under the hood."

"You just went straight over my head!" the man about my age said. "Mike Barnes, financial analyst."

"Steve Adams, software developer and company President."

"What company?"

"NIKA Consulting. You?"

"Clermont Capital."

"Then I should say right up front that I'm close friends with Samantha Spurgeon."

"Unless the aircraft is bugged, which would be tough with the ambient noise, I think we're safe talking!"

I chuckled, "I've heard there was bad blood between your boss and Noel Spurgeon, even before his arrest, escape, and re-arrest."

"It goes back to something that happened in 1988. I don't know the details, but Jonathan walked out with his clients and founded Clermont."

"Named after his home county, which is actually where I grew up as well. What do you follow?"

"Mostly biotech. I'm going to meet with some people associated with the University of Arizona Medical School. I can't say more. Business or pleasure trip?"

"Business, though for one of my partnerships, not NIKA. I'm meeting with a tech startup, and I can't say more."

"So much for shop talk!" he said. "Sports fan?"

"The NHL more than anything. I'm a Penguins fan, and I don't think they'll make the playoffs this year. I used to follow NASCAR, but I've lost interest. The same with baseball and I used to be a big Reds fan before MLB canceled the World Series. You?"

"Premier League soccer and Formula 1."

"You sound like my boys! They're all fans of Tottenham Hotspur, and my sons go to Formula 1 races. One of those boys is also a NASCAR fan. Kids?"

"Three. You?"

"Seven."

"Jesus Christ, man!" he said, shaking his head. "Sorry."

"It's OK. A lot of people have that reaction. The kids don't all have the same mom."

"OK, that makes more sense! If I remember right, you're some kind of martial arts expert."

"I am «錬士» ('Renshi') or a 'polished instructor' in Shōtōkan, and hold a 6th Dan black belt."

"Remind me not to make you angry!"

"I have never used my skills in anger, and only twice in self-defense in the twenty-one years I've been training. And both of those times I used it solely to allow me to escape the confrontation."

"Do you run your own school?"

"No. I'm the senior advisor to the «shihan», or master of our dojo. Our school is based in Japan, where the overall master of our school lives."

"Have you been there?"

"Twice," I replied. "Once when I was confirmed as an instructor, and once for the funeral of the founder of our school. His son-in-law is the new master."

"I'd love to go to Japan, but I only go to Europe for business and haven't taken a trip to Asia."

"It's a trip worth making. I've been to Australia and Singapore as well. Also well worth the time and effort to get there."

"It's on our bucket list after the girls are out of college."

"You're about my age, so High School?"

"Sixth, eighth, and eleventh grade. Yours?"

"Range from sixth to eleventh."

"Hang on a sec!" he protested. "Math is my strong suit, along with biotech, and seven kids in five or six years? Twins?"

"No. It's complicated. Let's leave it at that."

"Sure. I'll let you get to what you planned to do. I have reading to do as well."

I nodded, put on my noise-canceling headphones, and began writing in my journal.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

Missy and I went into the house, and after we took off our hats, coats, and shoes, went upstairs to my room.

"Nobody will come home, right?" she asked.

"No, and even if they did, my moms wouldn't say a word. They're OK with me having girls in my room, and in the shower."

"Weird. My parents would never let me stay in the same room as my fiancé, let alone a guy I was just, uhm dating, I guess."

"That isn't surprising. May I see the test results?"

"Oh! They're in my bag which I left downstairs. I'll get them."

She left and was back in less than a minute with an envelope which she handed to me. I extracted the paper and it showed she was negative for the whole gamut, including hepatitis. I handed it back and showed her my card.

"Why a card?" she asked.

"It's easier to carry in my wallet," I replied. "I have it updated every three months."

"Whoa! Why so often?"

"My dad's rule," I replied. "Mainly because it's possible to test negative if you recently contracted the disease. It's low risk given my partners, but it's better to be totally safe. Did Birgit explain the rules?"

"Not in detail, but we aren't going to have sex."

"Any exchange of fluids can transmit disease," I said. "You read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*, right?"

"Sure?"

"Throat gonorrhea," I said. "Think about how you might get that."

Missy was quiet for a second then laughed, "Duh. OK. But I'm not sure..."

"We will absolutely only do what you want," I said. "With the limit we set before. Anyway, the rule is that if you're with anyone else, and I'm not saying you will be, they have to be tested, or you have to wait a few months and have a clean test before we can be together again. And no fudging or cheating; it's FAR too dangerous."

"OK."

"Let me turn on the water real quick."

I went into the bathroom, turned on the tap, and adjusted it so the temperature would be what I wanted, then went back to the bedroom.

"Ready to undress?" I asked.

"Yes," Missy said, blushing, but quickly pulled her sweater over her head without any hesitation.

LI. What Are You Doing Here?

November 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

When Missy removed the last of her clothes, we stood naked in front of each other, our clothes in two piles on the floor. I smiled appreciatively at her sexy body, especially her impressive chest and long legs.

"You don't like me?" she asked timidly, her eyes darting down to my groin.

"One thing I've learned is that nudity does not imply sex," I said. "And you know I'm in the sauna naked with girls. A hug and a kiss will bring about the reaction you're looking for...assuming you're looking for it."

"Uhm, just the shower, OK?"

"Then, for safety's sake, not even a kiss until we put our clothes back on."

"Seriously?" Missy asked. "But I want to see..."

"Then you draw the line we don't cross, but I'll hold you to it."

"I can't change my mind?"

"You could, but I don't want you to regret doing something you didn't intend to do because it feels so good you can't stop yourself. So choose a line, and we'll stick to it. If you want to cross it, it would be next time."

"Can't you just go with the flow?" Missy asked.

"I could, but you were the one who said you weren't sure how far you wanted to go."

"I know," Missy replied. "I'm just nervous and maybe even scared."

"Then let's just take a shower together and then I'll walk you home."

"OK."

I took her hand, and we stepped into the warm spray.

[Tempe, Arizona]

 Steve

I walked off the plane at Sky Harbor Airport, having returned to Arizona for the first time since 1972, when my family had lived in Tucson. I made my way to the arrivals hall and looked for the driver with a placard with my name. Spotting him, I walked over and introduced myself.

"Javier," he said. "May I take your bag?"

"I've got it," I said. "Just lead the way, please."

"The Hyatt near Sun Devil Stadium in Tempe, right?"

"Yes."

Ten minutes later we were on Arizona 202, heading east towards Tempe.

"First time in Phoenix?" Javier asked.

"I was here about twenty years ago when we lived briefly in Tucson before moving to Ohio."

"That's where you live now?"

"I live in Chicago; my parents are still in Ohio. You from Arizona?"

"Mexico. My parents came to Arizona in 1980 when I was three."

"College student?"

"Computer science at ASU."

"I'm in IT," I said.

"Doing?"

"I'm a software developer, though I'm also president of the company my friends and I founded when we graduated from college in 1985."

"That's cool! What kind of software?"

"Legal and medical," I replied. "But we also do consulting, contract programming, and systems engineering and operations support."

"Only in Chicago?"

"No, we have offices in Colorado, Texas, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. What do you want to do when you graduate?"

"Get a job!"

I chuckled, "OK, yes, but what's your dream job?"

"I'm really interested in high performance computing."

"I have a friend who is a professor and researcher at UofI who is into supercomputers and another friend who runs an investment firm that makes use of clusters of mid-range systems for high-speed trading. I'll give you my card, and if you call me when you're ready to interview, I'll put you in touch with both of them."

"Just like that?"

"I'll give you the foot in the door! The rest is up to you! And even though we're a boring company by those standards, you're welcome to interview with us as well."

"Can I ask why? I mean, you met me twelve minutes ago."

"You're working your way through school, right?"

"Yes, though I have grants and a partial scholarship."

"Anyone who works their way through school has the right attitude, and that is more important than anything else."

I took one of my cards from my pocket and handed it forward, over the seat. Javier took it and glanced at it before putting it in his pocket.

"NIKA?"

"It's a Greek word that means 'victorious' or 'winner'. My friend and co-founder came up with the name."

"How many of you got together to start the company?"

"Five, though one of them is an MBA, not a CS major. We needed someone who knew finances and taxes, and that sure wasn't any of the rest of us! There was a sixth who we hired right away, though she was just starting college at the time. I taught her to program while she was in High School and she's the best programmer in the company, though if you tell her I said that, I'll have to deny it!"

Javier laughed, "Better than you?"

"It's a close thing, but I'd say she's slightly better."

"Mind if I ask about your business here?"

"I'm evaluating a biotech startup for a friend of mine who lives overseas. We've done a lot of business together over the years, and he needed someone to actually eyeball the equipment they're developing. I can't say more than that, sorry."

"It's cool. How long are you in town?"

"Just until Friday morning."

"I have class, so I can't take you back to the airport. The company will send someone else."

"Does your family live in Phoenix?"

"Tucson, not too far from Davis Monthan."

"I was there for an air show back in '72," I replied. "We lived east, on Sabino Vista Drive, but that was thirty years ago, so I'm sure things have changed quite a bit."

"I'd say that's true," he said as he pulled up in front of the hotel.

He stopped, handed me a clipboard with an invoice which I signed, then took cash from my wallet, added a generous tip, and handed it forward.

"I'll need a receipt," I said.

He tore one off a pad, signed it, and handed it to me, leaving the fields blank as was typical.

"Just fill it out, please," I said. "I'm billing my friend and don't need to pad the bill!"

He laughed, wrote the numbers and date onto the receipt, then handed it to me. I thanked him, then got out of the car through the door which a bellman had opened.

"Welcome to the Hyatt," he said. "May I help you with any bags?"

"I just have the one bag, so no need," I replied, and slipped him five dollars.

"Thank you, Sir!" he exclaimed.

He shut the door, and the car pulled away as I walked into the hotel and went to the registration desk.

[Chicago]

 Jesse

"I'm not sure if I should be happy or offended that you didn't try anything!" Missy said as we dried off.

"Happy," I replied. "You have a great body and given the opportunity, I'd like to explore every inch, inside and out!"

Missy laughed nervously, "Inside, huh?"

"That's up to you," I replied, hanging up my towel and picking up my underwear.

"Jesse, would you hug me?" she asked timidly.

I nodded and held out my arms. Missy stepped forward, and I put my arms around her, pulling her lightly against me. Missy wrapped her arms around me, put her head on my shoulder, and sighed deeply.

"This feels nice," she said.

It certainly did, and the contact of her large, firm breasts on my chest and the tickle of her pubic hair on my dick caused an immediate reaction, though because of how we were standing, my dick couldn't stand straight up, instead it rose between her legs, my shaft pressing against her labia.

Missy surprised me by flexing her hips, her labia sliding back and forth on my rock hard shaft. After doing that for a bit, she lifted her head, clearly wanting a kiss. I knew I had to be very careful, but I felt a kiss would be OK. I lowered my head until our lips touched. She parted hers and our tongues began twirling around each other. Missy's arms tightened, pulling me more tightly against her

as she continued flexing her hips. We continued for about a minute before she broke the kiss.

"Jesse," she said, panting, "Do you want to?"

I absolutely did, but I also felt it was a bad idea, given everything she'd said, not to mention she needed to be home before dinner.

"I do," I replied. "But we only have a little time, and I want you to be sure."

She bit her lip, nodded, and stepped back, allowing my dick to stand straight up.

"But what about that?" she asked quietly, looking down.

"I'll be OK," I said. "Let's get dressed."

It was a bit uncomfortable, but I knew it would go away. I began dressing, and Missy followed suit. When we were fully clothed, we went downstairs, put on our shoes, coats, hats, and gloves, and left the house so I could walk her home.

[Phoenix, Arizona]

 Steve

"Welcome to the Hyatt, Mr. Adams!" The clerk at the registration desk said. "We have you in an executive suite for two nights, departing on Friday. Is that correct?"

"It is," I replied, handing over my American Express Card.

He made an imprint, and handed it back, along with a room key.

"Enjoy your stay, Mr. Adams," he said. "Do you need assistance with your bag?"

"No, thank you. May I ask for a good place to eat within walking distance?"

"Nearly everything close caters to the college set," he replied. "So if you're looking for something a bit upscale, you'll need to take a cab."

I considered and decided I'd eat in the hotel restaurant, as on Thursday I'd have lunch and dinner with people from the company I was evaluating. I thanked the clerk, then headed to the elevator to go up to my room. Once there, I unpacked, used the facilities, and headed down to the restaurant.

"Mr. Adams?!" a tall, beautiful, athletic blonde at the hostess stand exclaimed in surprise.

"Hi, CeCe!" I replied. "How are you?"

"Good! What are you doing here?"

"Business," I replied. "How long have you worked here?"

"I got the hostess job in August right after I moved into the dorms. The softball coach arranged it."

"That's cool."

"Table for one?" she asked.

"Yes."

"This way, please."

She led me to a booth in the corner and handed me a menu.

"Your waitress will be right over! If you need anything, just ask!"

"Thanks. It was nice seeing you."

"And you!" she said brightly.

She left and the waitress, also clearly a college student, but shorter, with dark hair and brown eyes, came to the table.

"Hi!" she exclaimed. "I'm Shelly, and I'll be your waitress. What can I get for you?"

"Sparkling water with lime, please."

She wrote that on her pad and left the table. I perused the menu, looking for things that would fit my carb budget. When Shelly returned with my drink, I ordered a house salad with vinaigrette dressing, but no croutons, a filet cooked medium rare, and steamed broccoli.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"That will do it, thanks."

She left to place the order, and I pulled out the latest edition of *The Economist* to read. Shelly brought my salad, and I read and ate, finishing the salad just before she brought my main course. She checked twice on me while I ate, the second time fetching another sparkling water with lime. When I finished eating, Shelly returned and handed me a dessert menu.

"See anything that looks good?" she asked, her tone making the question both suggestive and at the same time defensible as an honest question to a diner.

I looked the bubbly, dark-haired, college girl up and down and said, "I'm not sure anything fits my diet."

"You're in great shape!"

"Yes, but I have to watch what I eat."

"I can suggest something that tastes great and is less filling!"

I chuckled, "Beer is absolutely off my list of permitted foods."

"Right, because that's what I meant!" she said with a smile. "May I ask about the diet? As I said, you're in great shape."

"Martial arts," I replied. "As for the diet, I have strange metabolism, so I have to be careful of anything with lots of carbs. And also careful with anything sweet!"

"Bummer! So no desserts? Ever?"

"A friend of mine in Chicago is a chef, and he's come up with a way to make cakes and ice cream with an alternative sweetener."

"So you can eat anything that doesn't raise your blood sugar, right?" she asked invitingly.

"I could, though it has to meet my other strict dietary requirement."

"What's that?"

"I'm implying nothing by this, but a recent, clean STD test is mandatory."

"Hang on a sec," she said. "Someone is signaling me."

She walked away, and I placed a bet with myself that she'd *not* had the test. I wasn't sure why I thought that, but something said that was the case. She dealt with two other tables, then returned.

"I've always made the guy use a rubber," she said, confirming my suspicion.

"Wise, but my rule is a recent STD test, and I can't really waive it given my situation."

"Bummer," Shelly said, sounding disappointed. "How long does it take to get results?"

"At least a few days and often about a week, and I'm leaving on Friday morning."

"Well, that sucks!"

"Sorry. I was very interested."

"So no dessert then?"

"No. Just the check, please."

She walked away and came back with the check, which I signed to charge to the room, adding a very generous tip to indicate I appreciated her offer even if I couldn't avail myself of what I was sure would have been a fun time with a sexy college girl.

"If you're ever back here, give me a call," she said, handing me a paper with her name and number.

"I'll do that," I agreed, though I doubted I'd be back in Phoenix anytime soon.

I got up and walked towards the doors which led to the hotel proper.

"Did you enjoy your meal?" CeCe asked as I approached the hostess station.

"I did, thank you."

"I'm off at 10:00pm," she said. "Want to meet for a drink?"

"You're not twenty-one," I replied with a smile.

"So we'll drink Coke! Well, I will, because that doesn't fit your diet, right?"

"Right," I agreed, considering if I should take her up on her offer.

"Please?" she said. "Just a Coke and a chat?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"See you in the hotel lobby at 10:10pm," she said.

"See you then," I agreed.

 Birgit

"Birgit! Telephone!" Suzanne called out.

It was just before 9:00pm, and the call was on the land line, which was strange. I got up from the chaise in the sunroom and went to the kitchen to answer the phone.

"Birgit!" I exclaimed.

"Hi, Birgit. This is Tomás Castillo. I'm on Jesse's hockey team."

"Third line defenseman, right?" I asked.

"Yes! Jesse said you don't have a boyfriend, and I was wondering if you'd like to go out sometime."

I suppressed a groan because while it was true I didn't have a boyfriend, I had to deal with the situation with Philip before I could really do anything. I didn't want to say 'no' to Tomás, who was hunky and seemed like a really nice guy, but I also couldn't say 'yes' before I spoke to Philip.

"I'm busy this weekend," I said, "and next weekend is a karate tournament. Ask me again after Thanksgiving?"

"OK!" he exclaimed. "Thanks Birgit!"

"See you Friday with the gang!"

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up. I went back to the sunroom and picked up my book, but couldn't focus because I was still trying to figure out what I was going to say to Philip. I also knew I'd have to say something to Kjell as well, though that could wait a bit. I knew he was dating, and he knew I was, so it was really only the question of living with him for the year. That was a problem, but not nearly as big as the problem with Philip.

One way or the other, I wasn't going to be his girlfriend when I went to Sweden, because there was no way I was going to not have sex for an entire year, and I wanted to be with Kjell again, even if I wasn't living at his house. I also hoped for a chance with Mikael, but I wasn't sure that would be possible.

As I was thinking, I decided that I should talk to Aunt Penny because I knew she'd had similar dilemmas, including with my dad and later when she and Terry had split up and then got back together. I let Mom know I was going next door, then put on my shoes, coat, and hat and left the house. When I rang the bell at Penny's house, Terry answered, and I let him know I wanted to speak to Penny.

Five minutes later, we were in their study with hot cocoa.

"What's up?" Penny asked.

I smirked, "Well, I could say I'm here to ask if Terry can play!"

Penny laughed, "I don't think you can meet my price!" Penny declared with a smirk.

I laughed, "Talk dad into fucking your brains out?" I giggled.

"Right the first time! I never did believe you were as dumb as people say!"

"HEY!" I protested.

Penny laughed, "Gotcha!"

"I'll ask Dad," I said. "But that's not why I'm here."

"You realize the chance that he'll say yes is basically zero, even to the Empress of the Universe?"

"Well, it can't hurt to ask! I get twenty-four hours with Terry in exchange for you getting twenty-four hours with Dad!"

"Deal!" Penny exclaimed. "Now, the real reason you're here?"

I explained what had happened with Philip and how I felt and how I thought he felt, as well as the situations with Bob and Kjell and the call from Tomás.

"But no drama with girls?" Penny asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No comment," I giggled.

"So you have, and no drama," Penny said. "When I was with your dad, I rejected that idea out of hand. Later, I tried it and had fun, and shared. If I'd known when I was fifteen what I knew at twenty-two, I might have made different choices."

"Would you, really?" I asked. "I thought your choice was sex or a job, and you chose the job."

"Only because I thought I couldn't share," Penny replied. "As for the situation with Philip, I have to agree with your other confidantes -- you have to talk to him. Both Terry and I cheated, and it was a nightmare. I'm sure you know about your dad and your mom."

"Only because of something Aunt Jennifer said about Dad cheating on my mom, but I find it hard to believe, given what I know."

"Your mom was a very different person when I first met her, and very different from that before I met her. And your dad was so in love with her that he tried. Unfortunately, he ran into the one person who had enough emotional control over him that he failed to live up to his promise. He's never, ever made that mistake since."

"But how do you know?" I asked.

"Well, first of all, he's in a relationship that allows dalliances, but I know he's very careful not to do anything against your moms' wishes. Remember his definition of fidelity."

"Keeping your vows, whatever they are, however they're made, to the person with whom you've made them. Or persons."

"Exactly. I agree with Katy, Natalie, and Suzanne that you implied a promise to Philip, even if you didn't intend to. You aren't bound by his assumptions, but you owe him the respect of discussing it with him before you do anything with anyone else. Or him, for that matter. The worst thing, besides being with another guy, would be to invite Philip into your bed and tell him after, because you'd be operating under false pretenses."

"I hate the idea that someone else's assumptions compel action on my part!" I groused.

"Hate it or not, you do have a responsibility to discuss your relationship before you have sex. If he were a guy you picked up at a college party for a one-night stand, that would be different. But you two dated, and if *you* think he believes you're a couple, I'd say you can be sure he thinks so.

"I know it's backwards from how people tend to frame it, but taking his virginity without understanding what it meant to him was a mistake, and now you have to deal with the consequences. I'm not saying you shouldn't have gone to bed with him, but you should have made sure you were on the same page first. In a way, it's like the guy who says 'I love you' to get a girl into bed when he doesn't mean it. Granted, you didn't say it, but you sure implied it, from everything I can see."

"Everyone says that."

"Yes, and they're hearing only your side of the story, which tells me you believe it, too."

"Grrr."

Penny laughed, "You hate being wrong as much as your dad and I do! Any idea what you're going to do?"

"Well, either way, I'm not going to be tied down when I go to Sweden, so it would end then, no matter what."

"So tell him that up front and see how he reacts, then decide what to do. He does know you're going, right?"

"Yes."

"And I'm going to assume the sex was good, and it wouldn't be the worst punishment in the world if he was your boyfriend?"

"No, but there is one major problem -- we can't do anything in public, not even hold hands, until after I come back from Sweden."

"And that's a big deal to you?"

I shrugged, "I'm not sure. It's something I thought of just now."

"Have I helped?" Penny asked.

I smirked, "That depends on Dad!"

Penny laughed, "You can joust at that windmill when he comes back from Phoenix Doña Quixote!"

"I can be very convincing!" I declared.

"Good luck with that!"

I finished my cocoa, thanked Aunt Penny, and headed home with a strategy forming in my mind.

[Tempe, Arizona]

 Steve

I had spent some time writing in my journal, talking to my wives and kids, and reading, before heading down to the lobby at 10:05pm. I had considered changing my mind, but her request had seemed totally innocent, unlike Shelly's obvious flirting, that I'd decided no harm could come from having a drink with her in the hotel bar.

I stood outside the bar waiting and she showed up as promised, right at 10:10pm, dressed in jeans and blouse with her hair draped over her shoulders rather than pulled back in a ponytail.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi. It dawned on me, but can you go into the bar?"

"Yes, so long as we sit at a table. They serve bar food after the kitchen has closed, so they allow anyone in at a table, and card hard."

We went in and sat in a booth and a waitress came over.

"Coke for the young lady and Maker's Mark for me, please."

"Anything to eat?"

"No, thanks." I said.

"ID, please."

I showed her my driver's license and after verifying my age, she left. She was back a minute later with our drinks and I signed the check, charging the drinks to the room.

"How is school going?" I asked CeCe.

"Great! I'm enjoying my classes."

"When does softball start?"

"Practice starts in December and we start playing in early February. How is Jesse's hockey team doing?"

"Undefeated so far, though they've had a few close calls. You two aren't keeping in touch?"

"No. We kind of had a falling out because..."

I held up my hand, "Please don't share anything private."

"Sorry," she replied. "No, we don't keep in touch."

"Are you coming home next week?"

"No. I'm having Thanksgiving with one of my teammates who lives in Flagstaff. It's just too long to fly home for three days, especially because with classes, I couldn't fly home until Thursday morning. I'll be home at Christmas, though. Do you come to Phoenix often?"

"First time in thirty years," I replied. "I'm analyzing a biotech firm for a business partner."

"Something besides your computer company?"

"Yes. It's another venture I have on the side. What's your major?"

"Undeclared, but I'll choose a science or engineering program when the time comes. I have another year or so to figure it out. I'm taking the core requirements now."

"Doing well, I assume?"

"Straight A's so far. How is the family?"

"Great. Birgit is competing in a karate tournament next week, and before that she'll test for her black belt. She's also in Photography Club. The other kids are all doing their own things, though I suspect you didn't spend much time with any of them."

"No, just Jesse and, to some extent, Birgit. How's the weather in Chicago?"

"Typical for November! It's nothing like here! It's gorgeous outside."

CeCe laughed softly, "And people here think it's cold because it's around 60°F."

"It's all in what you're used to."

"True. It's going to be tough going home in December, even though people here will have on winter coats at night because the temps are in the mid-40's!"

"I don't even put on a jacket until the temp is below freezing!"

"You can always warm up in the sauna!"

"True!"

"Can I ask you a question without implying anything?"

"What?"

"It's actually more of an observation, really. That day in the sauna, I was really surprised you didn't look."

I chuckled, "I have very good peripheral vision! Staring would be rude, not to mention you were Jesse's girl."

CeCe frowned, "I was never Jesse's girl, even if I wanted to be. Oh, uhm, sorry."

"It's OK. To answer your question, my wives and I all agreed you were smoking hot! Kara's word was 'yummy'!"

CeCe laughed, "I think that's what Mom One said to Jesse at some point after she opened the door to his room."

"And knowing my Little Duck, no sheets or covers, right?"

"She said 'Cover up!' and Jesse replied it was her fault for opening the door!"

"Of course he did!" I chuckled. "He likes to tweak his moms every chance he gets."

"He likes to tease pretty much everyone, especially you and Birgit."

"You should have seen them before they became buddies," I said. "He could cause her to lose her mind just by walking into the room."

"She's not the only one," CeCe grouched. "He can be very annoying."

"He can, and I understand you're unhappy with him, but it's never to our benefit to dwell on the past. Learn from it, of course, but never dwell on it. Life is too short to have regrets that simmer just beneath the surface and cause you to miss out on the joys of life."

CeCe was quiet for a moment, then nodded, "You're saying not to sulk, right?"

"Yes. It does no real good and interferes with the enjoyment of life."

"*Carpe diem*?" she asked.

"Do you know the whole phrase?"

"I thought that was it."

"No, it's *Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*, and it means 'Seize the day, put little trust into tomorrow'. But, rather than how it's commonly understood, it's actually cautionary, warning that the future is unknown and you shouldn't leave things to chance. Or to put it in simple terms -- do everything you can each day to make your future better. That's how I live my life."

"But doesn't it amount to the same thing?"

"So long as you properly evaluate the opportunity in terms of risk versus rewards, yes."

"Have you made mistakes?"

"Too numerous to count! The key is learning from them and not repeating them. For some time, I would acknowledge the lesson I was supposed to learn, but not actually learn it. I think I finally got hold of it about eight years ago on my trip to Japan."

"Seriously? I would have thought it happened way before that, given how successful you are."

"Being successful does not mean you don't make mistakes, but I had plenty of people at work to keep me on the straight and narrow. My personal life, not so much."

"It's worked out OK, though, right? I mean, your family is awesome and you certainly have a situation most guys would kill for."

"And it took a ridiculous amount of hard work and suffering to achieve a relatively stable situation."

"But you're happy, right?"

"Very. Are you going to have another Coke?"

"If you're going to have another bourbon."

I shook my head, "I'm only allowed one."

"Because of your health problem?"

"That's the short answer, but my condition is complex and so far there isn't an actual diagnosis."

"But you seem so healthy!"

"Yes, because I strictly limit my carbohydrate and sugar intake, get plenty of exercise, plenty of sleep, limit my alcohol intake, and avoid stimulants like caffeine."

"But not stimulating girls, obviously!" CeCe teased.

I laughed, "A few doctors and psychologists think that's actually a symptom of my condition. It appears I'm hypersensitive to hormones, especially adrenaline and, very likely, testosterone."

CeCe smiled, then surprised me by putting her hand on mine.

"What about this stimulating girl?"

Fortunately, I didn't have a syncopal reaction and quickly evaluated the conversation. I hadn't felt CeCe was flirting at any point, despite being alert for any signs. My first inclination was it might be some kind of revenge against Jesse, but I'd learned my lessons about imputing motives to people without asking. The real question, as always, was what she was thinking and what she expected. Knowing that, I could make an informed decision.

"Jesse and I have an agreement," I said.

"Which no longer applies, because there is no chance I'm getting back together with him, and you didn't break the 'no flirting rule'."

"True," I agreed. "May I ask why?"

She smiled, "You aren't the only one with good peripheral vision. At the time, I thought you were too old for me, but leaving home and coming to college, and meeting more people who were older than me who weren't teachers or my friends' parents changed my perspective. I've been out with guys in their late twenties, something I would never have considered before I came to Arizona State."

"I'm a decade older than that," I said.

"You certainly don't look it! Not an ounce of fat, and just the barest hint of white hair that makes you look distinguished, not old."

"Thanks, I think," I chuckled.

"I mean it! The touch of white is sexy, something I would never have been able to say six months ago."

"When did you decide that's what you wanted?"

"When I said '*carpe diem*'. I honestly just wanted to talk, but when I said that, realized I wanted you, and decided I was going to ask you when we left, but then I had the opportunity when you made the comment about stimulants. Are you interested?"

"Interested? Yes. But it's a 'should' versus 'want' situation."

"What's your concern? I had an STD test about two weeks ago and haven't been with anyone since, and I'm on the Pill."

"Necessary, but not sufficient," I replied. "The STD test, I mean; I had a vasectomy after Ashley was born."

"So what would be sufficient?"

"Me being sure it wouldn't mess up your life, Jesse's life, or my life."

"I wouldn't tell Jesse; in fact, I wouldn't tell anyone. If Jesse drilled one thing into me..."

I could help but laugh hard.

"Oops!" CeCe exclaimed, realizing what she'd said.

"Go on."

"...it was that you don't tell anyone about it. I didn't want a reputation, and it took me a bit to understand that Jesse didn't want one, either, though I know some of the girls talked, which brought other girls."

"Been there, done that, got the t-shirt," I chuckled. "At about the same age."

"So like father, like son?"

"Jesse's actually smarter than I was, and far more mature."

"I think Jesse probably has better parents, at least from what I gather from things Jesse and Birgit said."

"My dad eventually came around; my mom is a piece of work."

"What will it take to get to 'yes'?"

"I don't know. I've never been with girl taller than me!"

"And that matters?"

"No! It was just a silly thing to say!"

"So Jesse comes by that part of his personality honestly, then!"

"He's perfected the 'smart ass' skill. Then again, so have the rest of my kids! Oh, and I do need to clarify one thing -- while I generally don't say anything, the price of freedom, as it were, is that I have to tell my wives about any encounter."

"Will Mrs. Adams be jealous?" CeCe asked with an impish smile.

"Which one?" I asked with a grin.

"The one Jesse calls Aunt Kara."

"She'll be insanely jealous."

"Is that a plus or a minus?" CeCe asked.

"A plus, but I'll pay for it!"

"Pay for it?"

"Teasing my wives usually ends up with punishment of some kind."

"Why do I have the idea that you enjoy the punishment?" CeCe asked with a knowing smile.

"Because you're an intelligent young woman!" I chuckled.

"And right now you're imagining my long legs wrapped around you!"

I chuckled, "I wasn't until you said it, but I am now, so I suppose that qualifies."

"It does!" CeCe exclaimed. "So, are we doing this? I won't be upset if you say 'no', but I hope you'll say 'yes'."

"You and Jesse are truly done? And you're not going to try to get back together with him?"

"No, and that's true either way, but I know his rule is that he won't be with anyone who's been with you. And even though I was unhappy with how things ended, I don't hold a grudge. He never misrepresented anything."

"May I see the test results?"

"They're in my desk in my dorm. It'll take me thirty minutes to get there and come back."

"I trust you, but I have to follow the rules Jessica set. May I offer an emolument?"

"I remember that from American government -- a bribe?"

"In the specific context, the Constitution implies that, but it means consideration, payment, or profit for a service. My offer is that in exchange for the inconvenience of walking back to your dorm, I'm available tomorrow night, too. Assuming I prove satisfactory, of course."

"I don't think there's any doubt about that! Walk with me?"

"I was going to offer."

We got up and left the hotel, and once we were outside, I took CeCe's hand.

"Did Shelly hit on you?" she asked.

"She did," I replied. "Something you suggested?"

"No way! I'd never do that. She picks up businessmen all the time. Let me guess -- she offered dessert."

"She did, but I derailed it at that point by asking about an STD test."

"Had you agreed to have her for dessert, she'd have hit you up for the price."

"Escort fees?" I asked.

"She usually talks the guys into between \$50 and \$100 for her 'education fund'. She almost always gets it. She's a good judge of businessmen."

"She'd have struck out," I replied. "I'd have suspected she was an undercover cop. It would be the perfect sting. Is she an ASU student?"

"I think so, but I've never seen her in class. But with the number of students at ASU, that's not surprising. Wait! You think she's a vice cop?"

"I have no idea, but it would be the perfect sting as I said. And they'd keep it quiet because that would let them keep it up."

"Have you had that happen?"

"I had an undercover cop hit on me at Union Station in Chicago. She pretended to be sixteen, but I made her because she had a 'tell'."

"That's a poker word, right?"

"Yes. Her eyes gave her away. What bugged me was that I was minding my own business, not cruising Halsted or responding to an add on Craigslist."

"So what happened?"

"I called her out, and she was totally pissed, but her two partners were amused that I'd 'made' her."

"So nothing came of it?"

"No," I replied, even though there had been other fallout from that incident.

When we reached CeCe's dorm, I waited in the lobby rather than sign in. CeCe returned with a small bag, and we left the dorm. Once we were outside, she handed me a folded sheet of paper. I unfolded it and saw a clean STI test, as she'd stated.

"Good to go?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Don't expect to get much sleep tonight or tomorrow night!"

LII. Ups and Downs

November 20, 2002, Tempe, Arizona

 Steve

"Any last requests?" I asked when we arrived in my suite.

CeCe laughed softly, "«La petite mort» -- the 'little death'?"

"Clever girl!" I observed.

"Are you implying I'm a velociraptor?" CeCe asked with her hands on her hips.

"Someone is very much aware of 'Darmok'!"

CeCe rolled her eyes, "As if anyone could spend more than two minutes at the Compound without being aware!"

She proved the point by walking over to the table, picking up my fedora, and playfully dropping it on the floor.

"Well played!" I declared.

"With one modification...I want to *fuck* not make love!"

"On a planet where everyone screwed like bunny rabbits, Wesley managed to receive a death sentence for trampling flowers!"

"You can play in my 'perfumed garden' and the only way that would happen is if I don't cum!"

"Have you read that book?"

"Yes! For my class in Eastern philosophy. Though I take issue with his idea of a perfect woman!"

I chuckled, "Plump, black hair, large black eyes, large breasts, and wide hips are pretty much the opposite of blonde, blue-eyed, small breasts, and an athletic build! In my opinion, he's mistaken!"

"Good to know! Of course, he says that a man worthy of praise can easily get an erection, doesn't cum quickly, and gets hard again quickly! And has a sufficiently large dick to ensure pleasure."

"I believe I qualify," I replied. "Though the refractory period gets longer with age."

"Time between, right?" CeCe asked.

"Yes. I'm sure you read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*."

"Of course. The Indian book does insist that oral sex is mandatory from the guy!"

"Conveniently leaving out reciprocity!" I chuckled. "But I've already pointed out errors he made in describing the 'perfect' woman. And I'd like to get a good look, please!"

CeCe smiled and began undressing and I did the same, so that a minute later, we were standing naked.

"I think this is the first time ever I'll have to tilt my head *up* for a kiss!" I chuckled.

"I'm only two inches taller than you!" CeCe protested. "And lying down it won't matter!"

I held my arms out, CeCe stepped into them, our lips met, our tongues touched, and we were off to the races.



November 21, 2002, Tempe, Arizona

 Steve

"You have amazing muscle control," I said to CeCe as we showered together on Thursday morning.

"And you have awesome oral technique and phenomenal stamina!"

"For an old guy?" I asked.

CeCe laughed, "For *any* guy! I hope three hours of sleep was enough."

"No, but I'll manage. And I can sleep in tomorrow because my flight isn't until 11:00am."

"I have class at 8:00am, unfortunately. Today, class isn't until 10:00am."

We finished our shower, dried ourselves, dressed, and at CeCe's suggestion, walked to a diner for breakfast. After breakfast, I walked her to campus, then hailed a cab to take me to the GlucoTech offices, which were about two miles from the hotel. I'd missed my morning run, and would on Friday, but that

couldn't be helped. Well, it could, but having an athletic, enthusiastic bedmate took priority.

"Steve Adams, SKJ Partners," I said, presenting my SKJ business card to the cute brunette receptionist at GlucoTech.

"Good morning, Mr. Adams!" she said brightly. "John and Amelia are expecting you."

"Thank you, Serenity!" I said, reading the name placard on her desk.

She stood up and walked me to their offices and my mind flashed back to watching Kimmy walk in the former NIKA offices in Hyde Park. I pushed that thought out of my mind to focus on the technology that I was sent to evaluate.

"Steve Adams, please meet John Abernathy and Amelia Sutton," Serenity said. "John, Amelia, Steve Adams of SKJ Partners."

"Thanks, Serenity!" John said.

She left, and I shook hands with both John and Amelia, who looked every bit as nerdy as the best software engineers at NIKA or Kara's Chemistry Mafia.

"There's coffee and pastries," John said. "Please help yourself."

"Pastries at a firm researching and developing continuous glucose monitoring?" I asked with a wry smile.

Amelia laughed, "So long as you don't have diabetes, occasional pastries are OK!"

"And there you'd be wrong," I replied. "I'm not a diabetic, but I have to avoid complex carbohydrates and added sugars because I have unusual metabolism and am extremely sensitive to changes in my blood sugar levels."

"And now I think I understand why Dante sent a guy whose CV basically screams 'computer nerd' to do his analysis!" John said.

"While I am a 'computer nerd', I'm also a businessman, and my wife is a trauma surgeon at the University of Chicago Hospital and a professor at the medical school. That's in addition to my medical condition, which I'd classify as either 'annoying' or 'interesting' depending on who's asking."

"Jumping right in, do you monitor your blood glucose?" Amelia asked.

"Not now, but I did for about eighteen months while my doctor at Mayo was trying to figure out what was going on."

"How did you find the testing regimen?" she asked.

"It felt medieval," I replied. "Sticking myself with lancets and putting drops of blood on a test strip several times a day. It immediately made me wonder about a better way, but nothing was on the market. Dante's request was actually unrelated to that, though, obviously, I have some basic understanding. What I'd really like is some kind of non-invasive monitoring that transmitted data directly to a handheld device like a Palm Pilot, or one of the new Blackberry phones that I'll have next month."

"Non-invasive is probably two decades away," John said, "if not three, by the time we figure out how to do it and get FDA approval. Continuous monitoring is achievable, though it requires a probe inserted in your arm that has to be replaced every two weeks."

"How often can you take readings? Continuous doesn't, at least in my mind, mean a reading every second."

"It's configurable down to five minutes right now, but fifteen or thirty minutes is more practical," Amelia said. "And, if it's combined with an insulin pump, it could be what amounts to an automated solution for Type 1 patients who have to have insulin. For Type 2, it would be more of an alerting system to tell you to increase or decrease your consumption of high glycemic index foods."

"I'm sure you have a presentation for me," I said.

"Actually, I think this conversation is better," John observed. "And we do have approval to demonstrate how it works for you, if you're willing to sign a release."

"I'm game," I said.

"Then let me get a tech and we'll set you up. We'll arrange to take it out after dinner tonight."

The procedure was simple, and relatively painless, but given most people tested themselves four times a day, inserting the monitor probe was a one-time thing, compared to fifty-six lances that would otherwise be necessary to obtain only a fraction of the data. A receiver with a display clipped onto my belt, and readings began to appear.

"Did you eat breakfast?" Amelia asked.

"Yes, but zero carbs. I had bacon, eggs, and coffee."

"And your glucose is normally this low?"

"Yes. If it goes above about 130, I start to feel effects of what amounts to a mild bipolar disorder manic phase."

"Interesting. Do you think we could see your medical records?"

"I can call Mary Whittaker at Mayo and ask her, and then sign a release you can fax to her. You might also want to speak to Doctor Mike Loucks in Rutherford, Ohio, who has reviewed my records and has made some suggestions to Mary for lines of inquiry."

"Cleveland Clinic?" John asked.

"No. Chief of Emergency Medicine at Rutherford Regional Hospital and Trauma Center. He's a friend of my wife's, and by all accounts, one of the best doctors on the planet."

"At a rural hospital?" Amelia asked.

"His goal, from the time he first thought about being a doctor, was to serve his community. He was born about fifteen minutes from that hospital and has never practiced anywhere except there and the next county over. He went to med school in that other county and did his Residency there as well."

"Interesting. Let's start with a tour, and then we can come back here and go through our presentation, if that's OK."

"It is," I agreed.

The rest of the morning was taken up with the tour, the presentation, and meeting the scientists and engineers who worked under the direction of John and Amelia. John was the head engineer and Amelia was an MD with a PhD who had never practiced medicine beyond her Residency, and had gone into research.

We had lunch with the engineering and research teams, and after lunch, I sat down with their CFO to go over the books, something crucial to Dante's decision. Their run rate compared to their existing capital was sustainable, but they absolutely needed an infusion of capital to make the leap from lab to commercialization. After two hours with the CFO, I was confident that they were sufficiently prudent in their spending, and would put new capital to good use, and Dante would see a nice return when the product hit the market.

The larger problem, as I knew it would be from conversations with Jessica, was FDA approval as a medical device. That was no easy task, and there would be opposition from the manufacturers and distributors of the lancet/strip/monitor systems who would claim that GlucoTech's product was untested, dangerous, and inaccurate, despite all the evidence I'd seen to the contrary.

At the end of the day, John, Amelia, and I had dinner at a nice steak house, and when we finished eating, we went back to their office so the tech could remove the glucose monitor probe. Once that was done, I returned to the hotel. I had two hours before CeCe finished her hostess shift, so I began working on my report to Dante. Knowing he was impatient, I dashed off an email with my preliminary thoughts, then began writing the detailed analysis.

I took a break to call home and spoke to my daughters, then my wives.

"Did you meet a cute girl on the plane?" Kara asked.

"No. My seatmate was a financial analyst for Clermont Capital, the main competitor to Spurgeon in Chicago. The waitress at dinner flirted, and it was clear she was available, but she hadn't had an STI test."

"That's a rarity!" Jessica exclaimed. "That pretty much always works out for you!"

"True, but in this case, it was probably good that it didn't, because later evidence suggested it was a prostitution sting."

"Evidence?" Kara asked.

"Something Cecilia Carpenter pointed out."

"Cecilia Carpenter?" Kara asked. "As in Jesse's CeCe?"

"She's a student at Arizona State and also works as hostess at the restaurant at the Hyatt."

"I think Tiger buried the lede!" Jessica teased.

"I think 'Tiger' buried himself in CeCe!" Suzanne declared mirthfully.

"Give the girl a cookie," I chuckled. "She and I had a chat, she made it clear she and Jesse were done, and then propositioned me. She is absolutely yummy!"

"I HATE YOU, Snuggle Bear!" Kara groused.

"I take it my Senior Wife is green with envy?" I asked.

"I'd say!" Suzanne replied. "Jennifer is going to be equally jealous!"

"Are you sure there won't be any problems with Jesse?" Jessica asked.

"CeCe won't say anything, nor will I, and I did verify that they're done. She really wanted to be Jesse's girl, as in a couple, but that's not where the Duck is at this stage in life. CeCe's been dating here and from what I gather, has had other lovers. And yes, she did have a clean STI test."

"What made you suspect the waitress was a prostitution sting?" Suzanne asked.

"CeCe said that Shelly, that's the girl's name, always asks for money, and something just screamed 'sting' similar to that situation at Union Station years ago."

"Would you have given her money?" Jessica asked.

"No. That would have caused the same thoughts to arise. It's one thing to make a deal similar to the one with María Cristina, or the one I'm likely to make with Keiki Aukai next month."

"Are you seeing her again tonight?" Kara asked.

"I expect to have those long athletic legs wrapped around me in about an hour!" I teased.

"You're mean, Snuggle Bear!" Kara said accusingly.

"Guilty as charged!"

"How did the meeting go?" Jessica asked.

"I actually had a chance to test their invasive continuous monitor. It was pretty cool watching my blood sugar fluctuate based on what I was eating and doing. I sent Dante a positive 'first glance' report and I'm working on the complete report. This is the real deal, Jess. We're absolutely going to make some money on this if Dante decides to invest. If it weren't for the express prohibition in the contract with Dante, I'd put some of our money behind this."

"What about non-invasive?"

"After lengthy discussions with everyone, including their regulatory expert, I'd say around 2025, assuming they can get it through the gantlet of FDA approval. Well, and assuming the tech works. These folks are brilliant, so if anyone can do it, they can."

"Who's running the medical side?"

"Amelia Sutton, a PhD, with an MD who did her Residency in endocrinology at Stanford but then went into research rather than practice medicine. She's absolutely brilliant. And before you ask, she had a rock roughly the size of Gibraltar on her left hand!"

"I'm going to look for anything she's published," Jessica said.

We spoke for another few minutes, I let them know I loved them all and that I'd see them on Friday afternoon. After I hung up, I worked on my report until there was a knock at the door. I got up and let CeCe into the room, then saved my work and shut down my laptop.

"How did it go today?" she asked.

"Very successful," I replied. "Unfortunately, I can't say more."

"Well, I didn't come here to talk!" she declared and began disrobing.



November 22, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"HI DAD!" I exclaimed when he walked into the house.

"Hi, Pumpkin!"

"Hugs, please, because I have to go meet the gang for dinner."

"And they're more important than I am?" Dad asked.

I stepped close, "Take me upstairs to my room and I'll forget all about dinner! And you'll forget about anyone else!"

"I can take you to your room," Dad smirked, "But I can't stay."

"You're just no fun, Dad!"

"So Penny tells me nearly every day! Go have fun with your friends!"

I hugged him, kissed his cheek, received a kiss on my forehead, then left the house to meet Jesse in the coach house. He was ready, so we set off for the Chinese restaurant. The gang had agreed to see *Die Another Day*, a James Bond movie, and unfortunately, Philip really wanted to see it, while I would have preferred to skip it so we could talk.

At the restaurant, I saw Tomás, and despite my complaint about not being able to kiss Philip in public, or even hold his hand, I was glad because that would have sent the wrong message to Tomás. He was tall and good looking, plus he was an athlete and a really nice guy. But I couldn't go out with him until I resolved the situation with Philip. And the same was true for Bob, who was with Meghan.

I'd come to the conclusion that I didn't want a steady boyfriend, and that I'd made a mistake not making it clear to Philip beforehand. I realized that I'd have to deal with situations similar to with Peter and Julie, because as Katy and others

had said, teens normally paired off. Jesse had similar problems with girls like CeCe and Angelina, though he'd have happily paired with Francesca if her stupid mom hadn't lost her fucking mind about the idea of Francesca and Jesse fucking.

I stifled a laugh when I once again thought about the girls I'd been with and how there had been zero drama. That was true of Lee and his boyfriend, too. Zero drama. And if I was honest with myself, and I had to be, there hadn't really been any drama with Peter except *mine*. And that little snit had caused me to mess things up with Bob. I was determined to rectify that, but it would take time.

Everyone was chatting, so I pushed all of that out of my mind and joined in the conversation.

 Steve

"Details!" Kara demanded, trying to look stern as my wives and I relaxed in the Indian room.

"Tall, sexy, soft in the right places, tight in the right places, and amazing muscle control that was like a massage! Also well-versed in 'Darmok' and knowledgeable about Eastern philosophy."

"Your new sweet spot? College girls?"

"My sweet spot is the three of you," I said. "Whatever else is true, there is nobody better."

"Liz," Jessica countered.

"As special as she is, she's not any of the three of you. I am, without question, the luckiest man in the world because I have the three of you! Well, and my kids, but that does not detract from how lucky I am to have found the three of you."

"Quirks of Fate," Suzanne said. "A chance seating arrangement in chemistry class, Bethany's accident, and a chance meeting on a flight to Denver."

"But isn't that true for most everyone? It's rare to have a situation like Jesse's with Francesca, or Matthew's with Chelsea. Or, and I suspect this will recover, Stephie's with Nicholas."

"Didn't you just contradict yourself?" Kara asked.

"Those are truly outliers. How many people actually marry their High School sweetheart these days? In the 50s and 60s? Sure. Less so in the 80s and 90s. College sweethearts are more common now, and if you think about it, it's because you meet so many new and interesting people, as opposed to going to school with them for a dozen years. Kara and I are outliers in that regard. Almost nobody we know married their High School sweetheart."

"Stephie?" Kara inquired.

"Yes, though she and I were within a hairsbreadth of being permanent. Loki had other ideas, and in a strange twist for him, put Stephie with exactly the man she needed to walk with her down that terrible path she was destined to walk."

"Going back to CeCe, she won't say anything to Jesse, right?"

"Right. I actually expressly asked about that, and we agreed except for my reporting requirements, neither of us would say anything. And the only way we'd ever be together again was in Arizona, lest the current incarnation of the Neighborhood Watch discover the relationship."

"Ashley is building a dossier!" Suzanne exclaimed. "She's as quiet as the grave! She wouldn't talk if you pulled out her fingernails! If I needed to talk to someone about something that had to be absolutely secret, no matter what, it would be her!"

"I have Katya Anisimova for that!" I declared.

"Ashley could give the KGB lessons in spycraft and secrecy!" Suzanne declared.

"So basically the opposite of Birgit," Jessica observed.

"Different strategies and different goals," I replied. "Birgit's was to make sure everyone knew she was aware of everything, but that worked counter to her purposes because that made people more circumspect around her. Ashley is the perfect intelligence officer! She reminds me of Katya in so many ways."

"A Russian girl you didn't get!" Kara declared.

"She was married when I met her, and she's as loyal to Aleksey Nikolay'ich as she ever was to the CPSU! Anyone up for a sauna?"

"Yes!" all three wives agreed.

 Birgit

"Come sit next to me," I said, patting the love seat next to me.

I'd enjoyed the movie, and had avoided obsessing about the conversation I was about to have with Philip, but now it was time.

"Did I do something wrong?" Philip asked, not moving.

I wanted to say it was saying 'I love you' but that would upset him, which I didn't want to do, but might happen anyway. Probably would, actually.

"No. Just come sit with me, please.

Philip sat down and I could tell he was nervous or concerned.

"Do you remember me saying I was going to Sweden in about eighteen months as an exchange student?"

"Yes."

"I don't think it would be a good idea to have a steady boyfriend who was five thousand kilometers away."

"You're breaking up with me?!" he asked, looking pained.

I suppressed a groan, because that confirmed he thought we were a couple.

"I'm simply saying that I don't want to go a whole year without going on dates."

"But I love you, Birgit!"

"I know this is going to sound strange coming from me, but I'm only fourteen. It's at least ten years before I even *think* about getting married, let alone get married. Nobody knows what will happen in those ten years. I honestly like you a lot, but I'm not ready to commit to anyone now."

"You don't love me," he said flatly.

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"No, I don't. I like you a lot, I really do, but I'm not in love with you. I'm not ready to be in love with anyone, and I'm not even sure I believe in being 'in love'. That doesn't mean I won't love my husband, whoever it might be, but it would be like my dad and my moms, who love each other, but aren't in love."

"But..." he took a deep breath and let it out, "...never mind. I think I'm going back to my dorm."

"You don't have to," I said. "I was just trying to explain how I feel right now."

"You don't want a boyfriend," he said flatly. "I got it."

He stood up and started for the door.

"Philip, I like you a lot."

"But not enough," he said sadly.

He opened the door and walked out. I thought about going after him, decided not to, but then realized he'd have to walk to the L in the cold, dark night. I got up and went to Natalie's room and was happy to see the light shining under the door. I knocked, and she asked me to come in. I quickly explained what happened, and she got up and hurried downstairs. I watched from the top of the stairs and saw them talk, and after a short debate, he appeared to agree to let her drive him. They left, and I went back to my room, undressed, brushed my teeth, then got into bed.



November 23, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"No Philip?" I asked when Birgit came into the sunroom on Saturday morning.

"When I explained how I felt, he decided to leave. I started by reminding him I was going to Sweden and didn't want a long-distance relationship and it spiraled downward from there. It really hurt him that I wasn't in love with him."

"You're very much like me in that way," I said. "Being 'in love' isn't a criterion because it's pure emotion. True love is much, much deeper."

"I wanted to explain, but he wasn't interested."

"I suspect he's the romantic type, given the things which interest him. What do you plan to do?"

"What can I do?" Birgit asked. "I don't feel the same way he does, even though I like him a lot."

"Give him a few days, then call him or send him a card. Explain yourself again, tell him what you can and can't offer, and see what he says. Well, assuming you want to see him again."

"I do like him, Dad; I just don't want to be in an exclusive relationship now, and especially not when I'm an exchange student."

"But you plan to live with the Kjellssons, right?"

"No," Birgit replied. "I decided not to. I have to tell Kjell. I was thinking it would be fun to live in Gothenburg where you lived and even go to the same school."

"We'll discuss that with YFU in about a year, but you should tell Kjell soon."

"I will. How was Arizona?"

"A successful trip," I replied.

"And you met a girl on the plane or at the company you were visiting, right?"

"Nope!"

"You're losing your touch, Dad!"

I wasn't, but I couldn't reveal that to Birgit.

"What is it you and your sister say to things like that? 'What-ever'?"

"Speaking of that, would you do me a huge, huge favor?" Birgit asked.

"It depends on what the favor is," I replied warily.

"Penny said I can have twenty-hour hours with Terry if she can have twenty-hour hours with you!"

I chuckled, "Taken literally, she'd be VERY upset!"

Birgit rolled her eyes, "You know what she meant!"

"Obviously! And you know that can't happen because she works for NIKA."

"Oh, please! You were together before! And you and Aunt Elyse still occasionally sleep together!"

"The NIKA problem aside, Penny would take it as meaning she could do it with me whenever she wanted. Making an exception would open a Pandora's box of trouble."

"How about an alternative?" Birgit asked with a silly smile.

"I can't wait to hear this," I chuckled.

"Penny gets twenty-four-hours with Terry and I get twenty-four-hours with you!"

"Same objection! All other considerations aside, you'd take it as meaning we could do it whenever you wanted, not just during that twenty-four hours."

"You're just no fun, Dad!"

I chuckled, "Penny is going to say the same thing when I tell her 'no'. Are you ready for your black belt test today?"

"Yes. You're skipping Jesse's game, right?"

"I couldn't miss my favorite eldest daughter's black belt test!"

"I'm your only eldest daughter!"

"So, favorite then!" I chuckled.

"I know how to wipe that smug look off your face, but you won't let me!"

"You're right! And I can tell Philip left early last night!"

"Grr!" Birgit growled.

"Breakfast, Steve-sama!" Yuriko called out from the door to the sunroom.

"Be there in two minutes!" I replied.

It was actually three, because Birgit always got her extra minute of cuddling.

 Jesse

"What's up with your sister and the college guy?" Tomás asked as we dressed for our game against Chicago Latin.

"You'd have to ask her," I replied. "I just know they're not a couple. She's been out with Bob, too."

"Isn't Meghan his girlfriend?"

"Just a friend, kind of like Libby and me. I do want to warn you that if you're thinking Birgit will be your girlfriend, you're thinking wrong."

"You mentioned that."

"I know, but it's important enough to repeat. Just treat her well or you'll end up in *my* penalty box!"

"I have only honorable intentions!" Tomás said piously.

"If that's true, you'll end up in *her* penalty box, and trust me, you do not want THAT!"

Tomás laughed, "I'll keep that in mind."

"Right now, the only thing you should keep in mind is stopping passes and blocking shots!"

"Good advice, Mr. Block," Coach Nelson declared. "Two more games to go, gentlemen, and we'll have our perfect season! But that's just the beginning! Go out there and play hard!"

"RAH!" everyone responded.

We filed out of the locker room onto the ice to begin our warmups and I saw most of the softball team and most of the cheer team in the stands, along with Zahra and Zaida. I made the supreme effort of focusing on hockey, rather than the gaggle of hot girls in the stands, and stretched and skated before standing in goal for the first half of shooting practice, trading off with Pete for the second half. When I looked up, I saw Jerry and Mia, and realized I'd need to have lunch with them. I hoped Zahra would understand, though she'd need lunch too, and could obviously join us.

The buzzer sounding ending warmups and we all skated to the bench to hear Coach's final instructions.

 Birgit

"Are you ready to test today?" Sensei Will asked when I arrived at the dojo with my dad, my mom, Suzanne, and my sisters.

"Yes, Sensei!" I exclaimed.

"Then you will lead our meditation and warm-ups."

"Yes, Sensei!"

"Sensei Molly and Sensei Ichirou will be here to join me on the promotion board. You understand why your dad cannot be on it."

"I do, but he'd be tougher on me than anyone else!"

Sensei Will nodded, "I don't disagree, but you also don't want even an implication of nepotism."

"No, but who would think that about my dad? Not anyone who knows him!"

"That's true, but again, there would be people who don't know him. Go get ready."

"Yes, Sensei!"

Ten minutes later, I was in front of the class and led the meditation, which involved lighting incense in front of Hiro-san's shrine and clapping my hands before we all stood quietly. I liked the ritual, especially because it didn't imply anything except respect for the founder of our school, and showed the meaning of his life apart from any deity.

I led exercises and when we finished, everyone took seats on benches along the wall, or on the floor in the «seiza», or 'sitting', position. Dad and Neil moved a table to the front of the dojo, then set up three chairs for Sensei Will, Sensei Molly, and Sensei Ichirou.

"Today, Birgit Adams is being tested for advancement to 1st Dan," Sensei Will announced. "Is there anyone who will vouch for her character?"

"I will!" Miyu announced, standing up, showing her HUGE baby belly. "Birgit has demonstrated the maturity and character to advance to black belt."

"Black belts of the Chicago dojo of Dojo Hisakawa Hiro, do you concur?"

"YES, SENSEI!" all the other black belts, including my mom and dad, said emphatically.

"Birgit! Front and center!"

"Yes, Sensei!" I declared, moving to the matt to face the black belt promotion board. I bowed deeply to them, then assumed the «hachinoji-dachi» or 'ready stance'.

The first part of the test was to recite the «Shōtōkan nijū kun» and the «Dōjō kun», which I did to perfection.

"Birgit-chan," Sensei Molly asked, "what is the aim of karate, according to Master Funakoshi?"

"The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of the participant."

She nodded and Sensei Will called on me to demonstrate four kata, selected at random, from the brown belt and black belt lists. I had practiced all of them, so I was positive that I passed, even if I wasn't perfect, which wasn't required. Following the kata, I had to break boards with my hand, foot, and elbow, which I did with no problem.

"Your first sparring partner is Therese," Sensei Will announced. "Jolene, please retrieve the flags and act as referee."

"Yes, Sensei!" Jolene replied.

Three minutes later, Jolene called 'Begin' and Therese proceeded to kick my butt, but she was 3rd Dan, so that wasn't surprising, and I landed enough blows and blocked enough strikes that I felt I had done sufficiently well to pass. My second opponent was Nellie, who was a 2nd Kyu brown belt. I easily whipped her, landing the majority of my strikes and blocking the majority of hers.

"Your final opponent is Sense Steve!" Sensei Will said with an evil smile.

I groaned because Dad was 5th Dan, the highest, and had been awarded 6th honorarily. The only positive was that he hadn't sparred in over a decade. Of course, that was little consolation.

"What do I get if I win?" I asked quietly with a smirk as we took our places.

Dad just laughed and took his place. My goal for the next three minutes was simply to survive.

"Begin!" Jolene said with a huge smile on her face.

Dad moved like a cat and I couldn't land a blow. He was basically taunting me and I was determined to land at least one blow, which, of course, led directly to him throwing me across the dojo. I hopped up quickly and moved back towards him, only to have him land a series of quick strikes with both hands and feet that seemed to come out of nowhere. I took a few steps back and formulated a plan of attack.

I fainted twice, moved back fainted again, then saw an opening. Or thought I did because before I knew it, Dad had pinned me to the mat and Jolene had smacked the floor three times, declaring the match over. In just about ANY other circumstance Dad pinning me under him would be a good thing, but this one was annoying, so I pushed him off, we both stood, bowed, and then dad went to sit while I faced the promotion board.

"Sensei Ichirou?" Sensei Will asked. "Your ruling?"

Sensei Ichirou was quiet for a moment, then said. "Pass!"

"Sensei Molly? Your ruling?"

"Pass!"

"I concur," Sensei Will said. "Pass! Birgit-chan, remove your belt!"

Everyone stood up, and I bowed to the board, then did as Sensei Will instructed. Dad came to stand in front of me with a brand new black belt, complete with Japanese characters stitched into it, similar to his. He put it around me, tied it, then bowed to me. I turned, and everyone bowed to me.

"There are refreshments in the small training room," Sensei Will said. "Everyone, please congratulate Birgit-chan!"

The first person to congratulate me was Mr. Felipe who bowed deeply.

"Congratulations! You did very well, «Tesoro»!"

"Except with my dad!"

Mr. Felipe laughed, "You don't think, perhaps, he took great pleasure in putting you in your place?"

"Of course he did!" I groused. "But still!"

"You know the solution, «Tesoro»! Just learn to be better! Don't you tell me it's trivially easy for girls to do better than boys?"

"Grr."

He laughed again, "Perhaps this will assuage your bruised ego!"

He handed me a festively wrapped package.

"Should I open this now?"

"If you wish."

I did, and saw a small gold necklace with a pair of small diamonds.

"To match the sparkle of your eyes, «Tesoro»!"

"Thank you, Mr. Felipe!" I exclaimed, giving him a tight hug.

"You're welcome!"

 Steve

"You will not find it so easy when the time comes to spar with me!" Miyu said as we had small pieces of a cake Ashley had made to meet my dietary restrictions.

"We'll see!" I chuckled.

"This is where the mischievous fifteen-year-old would have made a bet with you, but the mature, married woman cannot."

"You didn't like me very much back then," I replied.

"I got better!" Miyu exclaimed.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Like a beached whale and I still have three weeks until term! I waddle everywhere and have to pee every fifteen minutes!"

"How long after you deliver before we have our battle for supremacy?"

"About six months, according to my doctor. She says that's when I can begin to spar, but I can work out as soon as I feel up to it after I deliver the baby elephant!"

I chuckled, "Having a small Japanese frame does make it seem like that. Your sister had the same problem, though she's a few inches taller."

"Good things come in small packages, Sensei! And this one is going to cut you down to size!"

"We'll see!" I chuckled.

"I had no idea how well you could spar," Rachel Kealty said, coming up to us.

"Me, either, actually," I admitted. "That was the first true full contact, no limits «kumite» I've done since my second concussion."

Well, there were the two times in Japan, but the first one was an actual fight, not sparring, and the second one had rules and limits, which testing did not have, with rules less restrictive than competition.

"You move so naturally," Avanti observed. "Almost like a cat!"

"I do call him 'Tiger'!" Jessica interjected, coming over to us.

"Your daughter is happy, and unhappy," Kara said.

"Happy with her black belt, unhappy her dad kicked her ass?" Miyu asked.

"Exactly!"

"I think I'll go soothe the savage beast," I said.

I went over to where Birgit was chatting with the other girls around her age, and she excused herself so we could speak privately.

"Did you ask Sensei Will for that?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"No. I didn't know about it until after we arrived at the dojo. He asked if I'd be willing and I agreed."

"But how do you move like that without giving anything away?"

I smiled, "Something I can teach you now that you're a black belt!"

"Want to know the worst thing?" Birgit asked.

"Besides me kicking your butt?" I asked with a grin.

"Grr," Birgit growled. "It was being pinned to the floor and *not* enjoying it!"

I couldn't help but laugh, then held out my arms. Birgit stepped forward, we hugged, then went to join the others.

LIII. Truth and Reconciliation

November 23, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

The game against Chicago Latin was tough, but Nicholas scored an early goal on a powerplay and we scored one more in each period, giving up only one in the third period when we were shorthanded, for a final result of 3-1. That kept Chicago Latin in fourth place, and we maintained our undefeated record.

After showering and dressing in street clothes, I went out to meet Jerry and Mia. We agreed to have lunch at Ricobene's and I confirmed with Zahra and Zaida that it was OK, and they agreed, and Mitch and Fangsu accepted an invitation to come with us. I introduced everyone, and then we headed to the restaurant in three cars.

"Is your dad out of town?" Mia asked after we sat down at Ricobene's.

"No. My sister was testing for her black belt today, so he had to be there. My Aunt Suzanne recorded it with our video camera, so I can watch it later. Dad has been at nearly every game, so I totally understand. How are things in Madison?"

"Great!" Mia exclaimed. "Hockey is great, and we both have straight A's. Mom Two said you guys are undefeated!"

"Two games to go and the last one is against Oak Park."

"And Nicole is going to do her damndest to score on you, isn't she?"

"Nothing would make her happier than wrecking our undefeated season!" I admitted.

"Are she and Mikey still a couple?"

"Yes. We see them at our Hangouts. We had one last week, or I'd invite you. I take it you're going back before next Sunday afternoon?"

"Yes. We'll be back on December 16th after finals. Are you free Friday or Saturday of next week?"

"Yes. Give me a call and we'll get together."

"Cool!"

"Just so you know, my friend Scarlett from Rochester will be here, so she'll hang out with us."

"How serious is it?" Jerry asked.

"Enough that we've seen each other a few times, even though she lives in Rochester and I live in Chicago."

"High School?"

"College. She's a Sophomore at the University of Minnesota, Rochester. I met her at hockey camp over the summer. You'll like her, I'm sure."

After we finished our lunch, Zahra and I drove Zaida home, and then Zahra and I went to my house, where, thankfully, my moms weren't home, as that might have made Zahra nervous.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked her when we walked into the house.

She smiled, "Are you asking to be polite, or because you think I might be nervous?"

"Yes," I replied with a smile.

Zahra smiled, then reached up and pulled down her scarf, revealing gorgeous black hair which she shook out so that it cascaded over her shoulders.

"You're beautiful!" I exclaimed.

"Your turn!" she exclaimed.

I pulled off my team sweatshirt, then lifted my heavy soldier's cross from under my t-shirt.

"You cheated!" Zahra exclaimed with a smile.

I laughed, slipped my cross back inside my t-shirt, then quickly pulled the t-shirt over my head.

"Very handsome!" Zahra declared.

"Would you like to go up to my room?" I asked.

"Yes," Zahra agreed. "Very much!"

I took her hand and led her up the stairs to my bedroom.

 Steve

After lunch, but before my afternoon karate class and my mentoring session with Avanti, I went next door to see Penny.

"I hear you and Birgit made a deal," I said with a grin.

Penny laughed, "Birgit asked for something, I said she couldn't meet the price, and she suggested something that *would* meet the price!"

"And you're completely innocent?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"I might have confirmed her surmise was correct."

"And you realize why it can't happen, right? That it has nothing at all to do with Birgit being with Terry?"

"Obviously! You wouldn't have a concern about that."

"Not for Birgit, but for you and Terry, given your history."

"You'd object?"

"No, but I'd advise you against it. I'm not sure your relationship with Terry would survive."

"Birgit being with him or me being with you?"

"Both. But in the end, that would be between you and Terry. But you and me? You know why that can't happen."

"A choice I made when I was fifteen, which I do not regret!" Penny declared.

"Which isn't to say I don't have fantasies!"

I chuckled, "We all do. The most important thing we can do is understand which ones are possible, and which ones have to remain fantasies."

"Will you answer a question for me?"

"What's that?"

"Do you miss it? I mean, you and me?"

"It's been twenty years," I replied. "I think the best thing to say is that given the same choice now that I gave you eighteen years ago, I'd choose to work with you and never regret that choice for a second."

"One more question. What are you going to say to Amber on her fourteenth birthday next July?"

"The more important question is what *you* are going to say."

"That she should wait until she turns fifteen, just as I did."

"Then that's the law, according to Steve and Penny," I said firmly.

 Jesse

"I know it seems strange," Zahra said as she pulled her sweater over her head, "but this is easier than removing my scarf."

"Actually, it doesn't," I replied. "I understand the significance of removing your scarf, and the implication of you doing that."

I began undressing as well and a minute later, we were both naked.

"Gorgeous doesn't even begin to describe it," I said appreciatively.

She was six inches shorter than I was, and breathtakingly beautiful with olive skin, small, firm breasts capped by brown nipples, nicely flared hips, neatly trimmed black pubic hair, and plump labia. There wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere on her body.

"Thank you," she said with a smile.

"I understand Islam has some purity rules regarding sex," I said.

Zahra smiled, "And if I thought those mattered, I would not be standing naked in a man's room, ready to give myself to him!"

"Good point," I replied. "Though what we do is up to you."

"I want you to make me a woman today, Jesse," she said quietly, then looked down at my raging erection, which had sprung up as soon as I'd seen her naked. "I want that inside me."

And I absolutely wanted to be inside her! I took her in my arms, pulled her firm, sexy body against mine, and when she turned up her head, I touched my lips to hers. Zahra parted her lips, and I pushed my tongue gently into her mouth. Zahra responded by squeezing her arms tightly around me and fiercely kissing me, her tongue battling with mine.

We kissed for a minute, then I scooped Zahra into my arms and she put her arms around my neck. I carried her over to my bed, managed to pull down the duvet, and laid her on the bed. I climbed in next to her and we both turned on our side so we could kiss. As our tongues danced, I ran my hand along Zahra's side, hip, and upper leg.

After a few minutes, I gently pushed her onto her back, sucked on each of her hard nipples in turn, then kissed my way down her chest and stomach. I moved between Zahra's legs, slipped my arms under them, and lowered my mouth to her glistening labia. I licked up and down a few times, then pressed the tip of my tongue against Zahra's clit, causing her to moan softly.

Zahra's juices tasted wonderful, and I probed her tunnel, her tight labia gripping my tongue as I swirled it inside her tight tunnel. After a minute or so, I closed my mouth around her clit, sucked softly, and teased it with my tongue. Zahra gasped, moaned, then groaned as she had her first orgasm. I knew what she wanted, and she was certainly wet enough, so I moved on top of her, grasped my shaft and rubbed my glans up and down along her dripping labia.

"Slow and gentle," she whispered.

I nodded and looked into her eyes as I pushed my hips forward, my glans spreading her labia and entering her tight, slick tunnel. I used four gentle thrusts to fully embed myself in her, savoring the tight fit. I waited for a moment, then Zahra nodded, so I lowered my head to kiss her and began screwing her with slow, gentle thrusts. Zahra wrapped her arms and legs around me and began moving her hips to meet my thrusts.

We continued that slow, deliberate rhythm, kissing deeply, until Zahra groaned and her pussy spasmed around my shaft, her muscles rippling and providing intense pleasure. When Zahra's orgasm had run its course, she broke our kiss, panting.

"So wonderful," she breathed as we continued our slow-motion screw.

A few minutes later, Zahra tensed, squeezed her arms and legs tightly around me and groaned deeply as she had a more intense orgasm.

"Unreal," she breathed.

A third and fourth followed, each one more intense than the previous one, and just as the fourth had run its course, my pleasure reached its pinnacle. I pushed deeply into Zahra, ground against her clit, then groaned as I bathed her tunnel with jet after jet of cum. Immediately after the last spurt, I slowly pulled out, moved down, and orally pleased Zahra to orgasm, before moving up beside her. She turned to her side, threw one arm and one leg over me, snuggled close, and sighed deeply.

"I'm a woman now," she said. "Thank you."

I kissed the top of her head, then said, "It was fantastic."

"Will you want to do this with me again?" she asked.

"Absolutely."

"Today?"

"Absolutely!"

 Birgit

[The following takes place in Swedish]

DadsPumpkin: Hej!

KjellK88: Hej!

DadsPumpkin: How are you?

KjellK88: Good! What time is it by you?

DadsPumpkin: 1430. I need to tell you something.

KjellK88: Please don't say you have a boyfriend and are in

a relationship!

DadsPumpkin: No chance! But what I wanted to tell you is like that. I decided I want to go to the same school my dad went to in Göteborg. I'll see you, of course, and we can sleep together, but I think it would be better if I lived with another family.

KjellK88: Did I do something wrong?

DadsPumpkin: No way! It's complicated, but it does have to do with a guy who wanted to be my boyfriend the way you mean.

KjellK88: And you think living with me would make us a couple?

DadsPumpkin: Something like that, and I'm not ready for that.

KjellK88: Mom actually suggested you might change your mind. She says you are very much like your dad!

DadsPumpkin: Except I plan to have only ONE husband when the time comes.

KjellK88: Will I be permitted to apply? 🙄

DadsPumpkin: Well, your first interview was great! And second...and third... 😊

KjellK88: You're too funny! And I was teasing.

DadsPumpkin: I know! But you never know what might happen. You don't plan to marry before you finish university, right?

KjellK88: No way! And you know I've been dating since you left.

DadsPumpkin: Dating. Uh-huh!

KjellK88: Right, because you're living like a nun!

DadsPumpkin: Never! You're not upset?

KjellK88: No. But I hope you'll visit often.

DadsPumpkin: I will! You heard the story about my dad and Pia, right?

KjellK88: Yes. He saw her at least once a month, even though she lived in Helsingborg.

DadsPumpkin: I'm not sure how often, but there are plenty

of trains.

KjellK88: I wish I could see you before then.

DadsPumpkin: I don't think Dad has a vacation planned, but I know your family is welcome here. Or just you, if you want.

KjellK88: And I could sleep in your bed?.

DadsPumpkin: Of course! But you won't get much sleep!

KjellK88: I'll talk to my parents! Sorry, but I'm about to go out with my friends.

DadsPumpkin: Later!

KjellK88: Later!

That had gone FAR better than I'd hoped, because I really liked Kjell. Living with his family wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world, but I wanted to have as much fun, on my terms, as I could in Sweden. And I really did hope that Kjell could visit before I began my year as an exchange student in about eighteen months.

I got up from my desk, took off all my clothes, and checked myself in the mirror.

"You're still the sexiest girl on the planet, Birgit Adams!" I declared.

I got into the shower and washed my hair and body. When I finished, I dried off, then dressed in casual clothes. I brushed my hair, pulled it back in a loose ponytail, then went downstairs. Dad was with Avanti, so I let my mom know I was going to Tiffany's house to meet some of the girl gang.

 Jesse

After two more slow, gentle screws, I led Zahra to the bathroom so we could shower.

"Could I see you next weekend?" Zahra asked as I adjusted the temperature of the spray.

"I have a friend visiting," I said.

"I understand. In two weeks, then? Saturday is probably the only day I could be away from home without drawing suspicion. Well, unless I skip homework with Birgit and Zaida, but that would make my parents suspicious because I'd be doing homework at home."

"Two weeks would be fine," I said, stepping into the shower.

Zahra stepped in as well and I began washing her, remembering the concern about different soap and shampoo.

"You're going to smell like my soap," I said.

"I have body spray in my purse," Zahra said. "I didn't know we'd shower, so I was going to use it so I could hide what I was sure would smell like I'd done something about which my parents would not be happy!"

"Smart thinking!"

"This is almost perfect," Zahra sighed as I lathered her sexy butt.

"What would make it perfect?" I asked.

"If you were Muslim! My dad would certainly agree to signing the papers so I could marry, which would let us do this all the time! And nobody could object!"

"Oh, people would object," I countered. "They'd lose their minds about you marrying at sixteen, which, by the way, is a year away. And I'm not ready to marry!"

"Neither am I!" Zahra declared. "I was just thinking about what it would be like to sleep in the same bed and be able to do what we just did whenever we wanted! You liked it a lot, right?"

"Very much! And I certainly want to do it again, but we also have to make sure your parents don't find out or even become suspicious. What did you tell them about this afternoon?"

"That I would be with friends from school at the hockey game, that we'd have lunch, and that I would be home before dinner. My parents aren't nearly as strict as Zaida's. So long as I say my prayers, go to services at the mosque, act respectful, and wear my scarf and conservative clothes, they don't bother me too much."

I finished lathering Zahra, and she rinsed off, then took the soap and began lathering my body. Her soft hands felt great, and she spent extra time on my groin, exploring my shaft and sack with her soapy hands, causing the inevitable reaction.

"Oops!" she giggled. "I seem to have caused a problem!"

"An accident?" I asked. "Or..."

"We can do it again, but then we'd have to shower once more!"

"Or we can just do it in the shower!"

"How so?"

I sat down, pulled her into my lap, and helped her mount me. Another slow, gentle screw, this one under the spray, resulted in three strong orgasms for

Zahra before her fourth one brought me off. When our orgasms had passed, she sighed deeply and put her head on my chest.

"Amazing," she breathed. "Simply amazing."

We sat for a moment, then I helped her off me, and we both stood up to finish our shower. When we were clean, we dried off and went back to my room to dress. Zahra sprayed rose-scented body spray over herself before putting on her clothes, and once we were dressed, we left my room and went downstairs. We put on our shoes, coats, hats, and gloves and left the house so I could walk her home.

 Steve

After Avanti and I had finished our mentoring session, Yuriko came to the door of my study.

"Would you have tea with me, please?" she asked.

Jess was at work, Kara had gone to her lab after karate, and Suzanne and Natalie were out, and the kids were either out or going out, which meant Yuriko and I would shortly have the house to ourselves.

"Yes, of course," I replied.

I got up and followed her to the Indian room, where she'd already set out the tea. I sat down on one of the pillows and Yuriko poured tea for both of us, then sat across from me.

"You know, I never asked what it is your grandfather grows."

"Rice, barley, soy, cabbage, broccoli, spinach, and potatoes at various times in his fields, and he rotates the crops to keep the soil healthy. He also has greenhouses for tomatoes and strawberries. And he has chickens, as well, for eggs. He also tends bonsai as a form of relaxation, and an alternate source of income."

"Who helps him now?"

"He has two hired men who work full time, and others who work part time. He's still able to do a lot of work himself, though not as much as he once could."

"How old is he?"

"Sixty-five. He's in very good health, and my great-grandfather is still alive and is healthy at age eighty-eight. Your dad is the same age, right?"

"He was eighty-five in August, so very close, and he, too, is in very good health."

"Did you ever think of taking over your dad's business?" Yuriko asked.

"No. Once I discovered computers when I was fifteen, I knew that was what I wanted to do. Before that, I hadn't really focused on anything specific."

"None of the kids have decided, have they? Well, besides Albert, who wants to go to the Naval Academy?"

"No, though Jesse is strongly leaning towards a degree in business, which, combined with his hockey experience, would lead to a job with the NHL. Birgit has mentioned chemistry or chemical engineering, and Matthew has mentioned joining the Navy, but they all have years to think about it."

"You should come to Japan with Birgit," Yuriko said.

"I would love to, but I don't think it will fit into the family schedule."

"Perhaps someday."

"Absolutely," I agreed.

"When we finish our tea, may I bathe you and pleasure you?"

"You may."

Yuriko smiled and poured us each a second cup of tea. We sipped in silence, and when we finished, we stood, she took my hand and led me to the Playroom, where she bathed me, then led me to the bed where she pleased me with her mouth, then a second time by riding me.

"May I pleasure you?" I asked after I'd cum the second time.

"Yes, as I know it pleases you to do so! And then I wish the strong, handsome American man to make love to me!"

I did as Yuriko requested, and after an athletic lovemaking session, we cuddled together.

"Have I said recently how much I appreciate everything you do around the house?" I asked.

"It is my pleasure to serve you, Steve-sama! It brings me great pleasure, and I hope to find a man as kind and generous as you in Japan."

"Ask Sakurako," I suggested. "I'm sure she knows one of Sensei Hideki's students who would be suitable."

"She has indicated there are one or two she believes would be a good choice. But I still have four more years before I return home permanently. I will be the perfect age to marry in modern Japan. Sakurako was very young, but she is much more traditional than I am."

It was a matter of degrees, though those degrees resulted in significantly different approaches to life.

"And what would your grandfather say if I visited you?"

"That I am my own woman, free to decide, and once he saw how respectful you were, and heard from Hideki-san about your rank in the school, he would welcome you with open arms and not object to you sharing my futon."

"What about your parents?"

"They live in Osaka, and my grandfather would not say anything, as my dad and he do not see eye to eye on many things."

"That sounds like Sakurako's parents."

"Very much so. I strongly prefer the countryside to the city. I love Chicago, but I would not wish to live here for the rest of my life."

"Elyse had similar feelings, though she prefers the suburbs to a truly rural place."

"Sakurako said that you enjoyed the peacefulness of the karate school compound."

"I did, and I enjoy going to the UP in Michigan as well as Vermont, but I love the city, and I plan to stay here. Are you staying here over Christmas break?"

"Yes. It's too much travel for only ten days. I will go home again the day after classes end in June, then return at the same time as Birgit travels home. Jesse will be there visiting Akiko, so actually the three of us will fly to the US together."

Unfortunately, we had to get out of bed so I could walk to the hospital to meet Jessica. We cleaned up, dressed, and I left home alone, as Kara and Suzanne hadn't returned home. Kara would be home for dinner. There was no Guys' Night and there would be no breakfast the following Saturday, due to Thanksgiving, so Kara, Jess, and I would have the evening together.

"Hi, Babe!" I exclaimed when Jessica came out of the hospital with Allyson and Lucy.

"Hi!" Allyson responded before Jessica could.

I laughed, then hugged and kissed Jessica.

"Can anyone do that?" Allyson asked.

"Go for it, if you dare!" Jessica said with a silly smile.

"What do you think, Lucy? Just like in college?"

Lucy laughed, "If you're referring to the games we played that Paula organized, we're short about six girls!"

"Hmm," I said, stroking my beard like an evil supervillain.

"Jess," Allyson said, "I think your rule is probably a good one, though I have the distinct impression he'd knock my socks off."

"If you were coherent the next morning, it would be because Tiger had an off day!"

"Now you're tempting ME," Lucy declared. "Though Paul would object, so that's a non-starter."

"That's your cop?" I asked.

"Detective Sergeant in the narcotics division."

"I bet he's busy."

"Unfortunately, and we see the results of failed interdiction and prevention. Ally had an OD today who didn't make it. A guy my boyfriend busted twice, but the revolving door just put him back on the street."

"Long-term incarceration for drug offenses is foolish," I said. "Counseling and treatment, along with job training, are the way to go."

"We three agree," Allyson said. "Where are your other wives?"

"Kara is finishing up in her polymer lab, and Suzanne is out with her Coven and Natalie."

"Coven?" Allyson asked.

"What we jokingly call her group of college friends. Similar to calling Ashley's group the 'Stepsisters' and Stephie's group the 'Fluffle'. I also called Kara's group of friends the Chemistry Mafia."

"And the doctors?" Lucy asked.

"Jess was in Indianapolis for medical school, so her study group was there. She did do visiting student rotations here, but mostly she was there. Once she was here, as a Resident, well, what Resident has time for a social life?"

"No kidding!" Lucy said, shaking her head. "There was a reason I didn't marry. It was tough enough finding time for sleep and occasional sex, let alone trying to have an actual relationship!"

"And it killed mine," Allyson said. "Jess managed."

"Kind of," Jessica said. "I had my own troubles, but those are in the past."

"We should get home, Babe," I said. "We're having Italian delivered."

We said 'goodbye' to Allyson and Lucy, and then Jessica and I walked hand-in-hand north towards the house.

"Yuriko didn't cook?" Jessica asked.

"She and I shared tea," I replied.

Jessica laughed, "Which in Tiger-speak means had sex all afternoon!"

"We did actually drink tea!" I protested.

"Before you had sex all afternoon!"

"True. How was your day?"

"Ally lost her OD, and she and I lost a pair of gang bangers who managed to shoot each other in a gunfight apparently over a girl, money, and drugs."

"Wonderful."

"Otherwise, the usual mix of trauma and pretending to be a GP. How did Birgit's test go?"

"She passed, though Sensei Will surprised her by having her spar with me. I was merciless."

"Of course you were!"

"Suzanne did record it so we can watch if you want. Jesse was planning to watch as well."

"I'd like to see it."

We arrived home just as Kara did, and then the three of us and Yuriko ate the meal which had been delivered while I was at the hospital.



November 24, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Who stitched my new belt?" I asked Dad when we cuddled on Sunday morning.

"Sakurako. The belt came from Sensei Hiro's dojo, not the local supply company."

"I need you to teach me how to beat you!" I declared.

"I can teach you the techniques, but beating me is up to you!"

"Miyu said she intends to beat you when she's permitted by her OB to spar again!"

"She is also welcome to try!" Dad chuckled.

"Are you ever going to compete?"

"Probably not," Dad replied. "The only person I wish to challenge and best is me."

"Because you weren't able to spar?"

"Sensei Jim strongly discouraged competition because he felt it distracted from the true focus of karate. I have to agree with him that I would have allowed that to go to my head. That's what you have to watch out for."

"That's what Sensei Will and Miyu have said."

"You should listen to them and be careful not to allow any trophies or medals to go to your head."

"I know," I said, snuggling close.

Dad's arms around me made me feel so safe, but also made me think of things I couldn't do with him, even though I wanted to.

"I spoke to Penny," Dad said.

"And you agreed she could have Terry and I could have you?!" I teased.

"No Pumpkin spice for me!" Dad said playfully. "And you know my answer to Penny."

"Because you promised Liz you wouldn't."

"That's part of it, but it's also the case that I don't want to mess up Penny's relationship with Terry. Even if he was fully on board, Penny would push things and it could only end badly. Did you decide what to do about Philip?"

"I'll send him a card on Wednesday that says I like him and want to keep seeing him. I don't think it'll do any good, because I think I hurt him pretty badly."

"Probably. The question is, did you learn your lesson?"

"I did," I replied. "And I IM'd with Kjell to explain that I felt it was better if I didn't live with him, but visited him the way Pia visited you."

"How did he take it?"

"OK, I think. He didn't seem upset, and he did say he was dating, which I take to mean behaving like a Swedish teenager!"

"Swimming in a sea of smoking hot teenage blondes!"

"What about THIS smoking hot teenage blonde?"

"What about her?" Dad asked.

"Don't be obtuse, Dad!" I declared.

Dad laughed, "Nice vocabulary!"

"I am orally proficient!" I teased.

"Of that, I have no doubt!"

"I can demonstrate, if you want!" I said, putting my hand on his stomach, which was as far as I could go without causing real trouble.

Dad chuckled, shook his head, and gently moved my hand to his arm.

"Breakfast!" Mom called from the door to the sunroom.

"Two minutes," Dad said.

I got three.

 Jesse

On Sunday, after church, Mitch, Tomás, Lee, Pete, Freddy, and Nicholas came to the house to hang out and play video games. After a few hours, we went to the main house to play pool, and finally ended up in the sauna.

"We have to figure out how to get the softball team in here again," Freddy said. "This time without Coach and their coach!"

"Been there, done that, got the entire softball team suspended," I said. "A bad idea."

"Says the guy who saw the entire team naked!" Freddy grouched.

"Try starting with one girl," Mitch teased. "You haven't managed yet!"

"Asshole"! Freddy growled.

"Ask out one of the girls who shows up at our games," Nicholas suggested. "You have your pick of the softball team and the cheer team!"

"The cheerleaders are all stuck up," Freddy observed.

"Not all of them," I countered. "But seriously, there are twenty girls on the softball team, and one of them will at least agree to go out with you! There's something for everyone there, too! No matter what attracts you, there's a girl on the team. Heck, if you want muscles the way Lee does, the new catcher could probably give you a run for your money in a wrestling match!"

"Lee, do you look at us that way?" Tomás asked.

"I notice guys I think are good looking, but none of you are gay or bi, so it doesn't really matter, does it? I bet Libby's girlfriend says the same thing about girls."

"My dad thinks...never mind," Tomás said. "I don't want to say it."

"Have I *ever* hit on you? Or anyone on the team?"

"No."

"And other than Jesse, I don't even make jokes. And I only joke with him because I know he's totally cool about it and because I've heard Libby tease him. And that's not saying anything is wrong with the rest of you guys, just that I know Jesse will joke right back."

"I mess with Libby and Lilibeth that way, too," I said. "Tomás, what's your dad's problem?"

"An overdose of 'macho'," Tomás replied. "It's the dumb Mexican thing. At least he doesn't try to control me the way he controls my little sister. It's like he's on a personal mission to keep every guy away from her for life."

"That's not just a Mexican thing," Pete said. "My dad is like that with my older sister and she's a Senior this year!"

"And until you meet a Muslim girl's dad, you haven't seen anything!" I said. "I told you guys how Mr. Kahn handled his family."

"My mom would cut my dad's balls off if he tried that shit!" Mitch declared.

"Hockey moms are brutal!" I chuckled. "And I have TWO of them!"

All the guys laughed.

"Seriously, though," Freddy said. "What about a party around Christmas? An unofficial one?"

"We'd still have to be super careful about the sauna," I said. "The only way it could work is with a smaller group, and only girls I was sure wouldn't rat us out."

Of course, I knew what had happened the previous time, and that was why I mostly avoided the cheer team. And the problems with Ebele gave me pause about being involved with anyone from the softball team. With Brooke visiting twice a week to 'integrate' and now with Zahra wanting to see me regularly, I was happy to just be friends with the girls. Not to mention Scarlett visiting, and Libby occasionally wanting to fool around, it wasn't like I was lacking partners. Sure, it wasn't like the previous year, but I had no complaints.

"Let's plan the party and see what happens," Freddy said. "I can set it up if you'll host, Jesse."

"Sure," I agreed.



November 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Can I talk to you?" I asked Bob when we got in line for lunch.

"You can always talk to me," he replied.

"I meant about us."

"Only if something has changed."

"It has," I said. "Can we sit at a private table?"

"Yes. Will your friends be OK with that?"

"Yes. I let them know I was going to try to talk to you."

We got our lunches and went to one of the tables that seated four, but I knew nobody would bother us.

"I had a conversation with Philip on Friday," I said. "We're done."

"You dumped him?" Bob asked.

"NO!" I protested. "I tried *not* to dump him, but when I tried to explain how I felt, he became upset and left."

"What did you say to him?"

"I started my reminding him that I'll be going to Sweden in eighteen months and said that I didn't it would be a good idea to have a steady boyfriend who was five thousand kilometers away. He instantly asked if I was breaking up with him, and I said I didn't want to go a whole year without going on dates. And it spiraled out of control from there, and ended with him leaving."

"I'd say you probably hurt him pretty badly," Bob said.

"I *know* I hurt him badly. And I know it was my fault for not making sure we were on the same page. I made sure I communicated with Kjell in Sweden, too, because I realized I had made a similar mistake. That one went way better, and we're totally on the same page."

"Are you going to try to talk to Philip?"

"Probably, but I doubt he'll talk to me."

"Then talk to me after you do that, and we'll see where we are."

"OK," I said. "I know I messed up and I really am sorry."

"I accept your apology, so long as you've learned your lesson."

"I have."

When we finished lunch, we hung out with Missy, Fangsu, Zaida, and Zahra, and at the end of the school day, Bob and I went to Photography club.

 Jesse

"Hi!" Missy exclaimed when I met her at Starbucks after school.

"Hi!"

"We could skip Starbucks and go to your house," Missy said. "If you want."

"That's up to you," I replied.

She grabbed my hand, and we turned to walk north to the Compound.

"Remember what I said about it?" I asked.

"I do," Missy exclaimed, then whispered, "I want to fuck!"

I'd had no real doubts that was the case, but the fact she could vocalize it made it very clear that she wanted to have sex. I did have to confirm that she understood what it meant.

"Me, too! I just don't want any misunderstandings."

"You mean that you don't want to be a couple with anyone now?"

"Yes. We hang out and do stuff, just not be exclusive."

"Can I ask a question about that?"

"Sure."

"Does that mean never, or just for now? I mean with me?"

"All I can say is that I'm not ruling anyone in or out, but I also don't want to give you false hope. I think it's important to let you know that on Wednesday evening my friend from Rochester will be here, and stay until Sunday."

"A girl, obviously."

"Obviously. But my point is, I can't make *any* promises to anyone, in that regard. If you're OK with that, and still want to fool around, then we will. But if that's a problem, then we shouldn't. May I ask a very personal question?"

"Sure," Missy agreed.

"Why do you want to do it now? And with me?"

"I've listened to what Rachel, Libby, and Birgit have said about how awesome sex is, and that it feels even better than rubbing yourself. When I first started rubbing myself, I didn't think of anyone, but then I started thinking about you and it made me even more excited. Then when I saw you naked, and when you rubbed your dick between my legs, I suddenly felt empty and needed it in me. I was absolutely sure I wanted it! Then you made me wait!"

"You understand why that was, right?" I inquired.

"Yes, because you were concerned I'd go further than I wanted if I got too excited. You were right, but that's not true today. I asked you to meet me because I wanted to fuck!"

"Then that's what we'll do!" I said as we turned right from East 50th Street into the alley which ran behind the Compound.

"Uh-oh," I said, seeing a CPD squad car parked blocking the alley about twenty yards from the corner.

"What's with the police car?" Missy asked.

"No idea," I said.

We walked up to the uniformed police officer who was standing by the car.

"I live two houses up," I said to the officer.

"I can't let you pass. It's a crime scene."

I looked past him and saw another squad car parked across the alley north of the coach house, which meant I couldn't go around. I realized arguing with the cop wasn't going to work, so I took Missy's hand and led her back up the alley to 50th Street.

"What do you think happened?" she asked.

"No idea. I saw a cop in the backyard of the house next door to ours, so whatever it is happened there."

We walked west on 50th, then turned onto South Woodlawn, and saw a squad car blocking the street and police tape around the house just south of ours. Fortunately, the sidewalk across the street wasn't blocked, so we used that to get past. As we were walking up the steps of the main house, a police officer called out.

"I need to ask you some questions," he said.

"Not without my dad or an attorney present," I replied.

"Just some questions, Kid."

"Same answer," I said. "Let me make a call."

He was quiet for a moment, then said, "Fine."

I took my cellphone from my pocket and dialed my dad's number.

LIV. I'm Anti-Stupidity

November 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"What's up, Jesse?" I asked when I answered my mobile phone on Monday afternoon.

"The police have the house next door cordoned off and want to talk to me."

"Not Penny's right?"

"Don't you think I'd have said it was her house if it was?" he asked, sounding perturbed.

"Sorry. Do you know what happened?"

"No. They haven't said, just that they want to talk to me. Missy is with me."

"How old is she?"

"Fifteen."

"Use your best judgment about what to do," I said. "But they cannot speak to Missy without her parents' approval. Make sure she knows. If you want to call Melanie, Grace, or Trish, that's fine with me."

"Well, I see six cop cars, they have the alley and the sidewalk blocked and Tom's company's EMS ambulance is parked out front, along with their engine, so I think I'd better."

"I suspect so. Make the call, and I'll head home. Call me if you find out any details."

"Thanks, Pops."

We ended the call, and I slipped my phone back into my pocket.

"What about my house?" Penny asked.

"Jesse said 'the house next door' and I was confirming it was the Williams' house, not yours. He said they have the alley and sidewalk cordoned off and that Tom's CFD company is there with an EMS ambulance and the engine. I'm going to head home because the cops want to talk to Jesse and his friend Missy."

"Amber was going to hang out at your house today as she usually does, so I think I'll head home as well."

"I'll let Dave know and see you at home."

 Jesse

"I'm going to call an attorney," I said to the police officer. "And my friend will need to ask her mom or dad, because she's only fifteen."

"We just want to ask you some questions," the cop said. "You aren't suspected of anything."

"Even so," I replied.

He sighed and shook his head, and Missy and I went to sit on the porch swing so I could call Kassar, Spencer & Associates. It was afternoon, so I had a good chance of getting hold of Aunt Melanie, and I was happy when they put me through.

"I'm not sure you need an attorney," Melanie said. "But I understand your concern given all the stuff that has gone on recently. I can't come now, and Grace is with Sam at a trial, but I can send Kelly Seavers, our newest associate. She just passed the Bar, but she'll be able to advise you in speaking to the police. I'll ask her to leave right now, so figure about forty minutes."

"Thanks! Tell Jonathan he needs to hang out with us more!"

"He's playing football, so you know how it is. When the season ends next month, he'll have more free time before baseball starts. Let me get Kelly on her way."

We ended the call, and then I let Missy use the phone to call her mom, who wanted to know what was going on. When Missy said we didn't know, her mom said she'd leave the hospital and come to the house. Mrs. Underhill, who was a nurse, arrived first and decided to wait for the attorney from Melanie's firm to arrive. Dad and Aunt Penny arrived next.

"Do you know anything more?" Dad asked.

"The Medical Examiner is here, so I think that's clear," I said.

"Crystal," Dad replied. "Now I'm glad you decided to call Melanie."

"She's sending a new associate, and I'm going to guess it's the hot blonde walking up the sidewalk carrying an expensive leather bag and wearing a nice dress."

"She's probably only about nine years older than you," Dad teased.

"Look, Penguin!" I threatened, but neither Dad nor I could say more because the young woman came up to us.

"I'm looking for Jesse Block," the pretty blonde said.

"That's me," I said, standing up. "This is my dad, Steve Adams. And this is Penny Penfield, who lives in the house next door but not the one the cops are at. This is Mrs. Underhill and my friend Missy."

"Kelly Seavers," she said. "Do you know what happened?"

"The Medical Examiner is here, so I'd say somebody is dead," I replied.

"Do you know anything?"

"Zilch," I replied.

"And you, Missy?"

"Nothing."

"OK. Let me go speak to the police officer and have him come talk to you."

She walked over to the two cops guarding the sidewalk and, after a brief conversation, a male and female detective followed her back to the porch. Ms. Seavers introduced everyone, then the detectives introduced themselves as Detectives León and Madison of the Major Crimes Unit.

"Mind telling us what happened?" Dad asked.

"Jackie Williams was murdered," Detective León replied.

"Whoa!" Missy gasped.

"What time?" I asked.

"We're estimating 1:00pm."

"None of us were home," I said. "Everyone was either in school or at work."

"That's correct," Dad confirmed.

"How well did you know the Williams?" Detective Madison asked.

"Not very," Dad replied. "They didn't socialize with us."

"Racial thing?" Detective Madison asked.

The Williams were African American, but that wasn't it. I decided it was best to let Dad answer that question, because it was about them not approving of our 'lifestye' at the Compound.

"Not from our perspective," Dad said. "You'd have to ask Mr. Williams or his sons about it."

"Do you know if there was any bad blood with anyone?"

"None of which I'm aware," Dad said. "Jesse?"

"I don't think so. Justus and Kordell are both on the football team at Kenwood Academy. I play hockey, so I don't hang with them."

"Were they affiliated?" Detective Madison asked.

"I don't think so, but I can't be sure. There are at least three gangs active at the school, but I do not hang with anyone affiliated with a gang. I know they didn't use drugs because everyone on a sports team is subject to random drug tests and neither of them was ever suspended from the team. Justus is a starting wideout and Kordell is the backup quarterback."

"Was there any suspicious activity?" Detective León asked.

"Not that I know of. Dad?"

"No," Dad replied. "Of course, we didn't interact with them very often. Do you have a suspect?"

"Nobody we'd talk about at this point," Detective Madison replied.

"The guys are at football practice," I said. "Someone should go over to Kenwood Academy."

"Do you know where Mr. Williams works?" Detective Madison asked Dad.

"He's an executive at Korn Ferry," Dad replied. "That's all I know."

"Do you know what they do?"

"Management consulting," Dad said.

"Miss," Detective Madison said to Missy, "Do you have anything to add?"

"No," Missy replied. "I live a few blocks away and Jesse and I met at Starbucks after school and when we started walking towards our houses, we saw the police cars."

I wondered what her mom would say after, and one thing seemed certain, Missy wasn't going to get to do what she'd planned for the afternoon.

"OK," the detective said. "I'll have a uniformed officer take down all your names and contact information. We'll call you if we need more information."

"Are you able to say how she was killed?" Mrs. Underhill asked.

"It appears to be blunt-force trauma."

"Robbery?" Dad asked.

"We don't know yet," the Detective asked. "Crime scene techs are processing the house, and we need to speak to Mr. Williams and his sons."

They walked away, and we waited for a uniformed officer to come over and take down all of our information.

"Do you need anything else, Mr. Adams?" Ms. Seavers asked.

"No," Dad replied. "Have Melanie charge your time to our retainer."

She agreed, then left.

"I need to get back to the hospital and finish my shift," Mrs. Underhill said.

"Missy, you should go right home."

"Can I hang out with Birgit?" Missy asked. "She should be home from Photography Club in fifteen minutes."

"Is that OK, Mr. Adams?" Mrs. Underhill asked.

"Absolutely," Dad agreed.

She left and the rest of us went into the house where Stephie, Ashley, Amber, Chadrima, and Kaley were doing homework in the sunroom. Albert wasn't home because he had some Scouting thing after school.

"Did you guys miss the police next door?" I asked Ashley.

"We saw them, but they didn't say anything to us. What happened?"

"Somebody murdered Mrs. Williams."

"NO WAY!" Ashley exclaimed. "Mr. Williams?"

"The police didn't say. Missy and I are going to hang out."

"Uh huh," Ashley smirked.

I ignored her and Missy and I left the main house to go to the coach house.

 Birgit

"What the heck?" I asked as Zaida, Fangsu, Zahra, and I crossed 50th Street.

"Cross over, Birgit," Fangsu suggested. "The sidewalk on the other side isn't blocked."

"I wonder what happened?" Zaida asked.

"No clue," I replied. "I see the Medical Examiner's van, so it can't be good."

"Why?" Zaida asked.

"He's the Chicago version of a coroner," I said.

"Oh! Someone died?!"

"That's the only reason the Medical Examiner would be here, not to mention I see the CFD paramedics standing by their ambulance and they don't look as if they're in any hurry to do anything."

"Can we get to your house?" Fangsu asked.

"It looks like it," I said. "The police are on the sidewalk between our house and the Williams' house."

We did get to the house, and the cops didn't bother us. When we went inside, I saw Dad and Penny in the kitchen, so I went in to ask what happened.

"The police said Mrs. Williams was murdered," Dad said.

"WHOA!" I exclaimed. "Mr. Williams?"

"The police didn't say. Why would you say that?"

"Leslie is a huge football fan and said she saw them having a huge argument at the game on Friday night."

"Is Leslie with you?"

"No, just Fangsu, Zaida, and Zahra. We're going to do homework."

"Call Leslie and say she should speak to her parents about speaking to the police, but keep what she told you to yourself, because it might not be related."

"Right," I said, rolling my eyes. "They have a huge argument and she ends up dead three days later?"

"Even so," Dad said. "Call Leslie and say nothing to anyone else."

I pulled my mobile phone from my pocket, scrolled through the address book because I didn't have Leslie on speed dial, and pressed the 'Call' button when I had her number displayed.

"Hi, it's Birgit," I said when she answered.

"Hi, Birgit! What's up?"

"You remember how you said the Williams had a huge argument on Friday night at the football game?"

"What about it?"

"The police are next door because she was murdered. You should tell your mom and dad and tell the police what you know."

"HOLY FUCK!" Leslie gasped.

"*LESLIE!*" I heard her mom reprimand her angrily.

"I gotta go, Birgit!"

She hung up right away, which didn't surprise me because her parents were super strict, especially about swearing. I put my phone back into my pocket and went to the sunroom to join my friends so we could work on our homework, though I was a bit creeped out by a murder happening next door.

 Jesse

"Ready to see the most amazing boobs in the entire school?" Missy teased.

"First of all, I've seen them!" I said with a goofy smile. "Second, that's a bold claim!"

Missy giggled and pulled her sweater over her head.

"Tell me who has bigger, firmer tits than me?"

"Nobody I know of our age," I replied, pulling my rugby shirt over my head.

"Who?"

"My dad's *Consigliere*, Liz!"

"But she's what? Like thirty?" Missy asked, pushing down her jeans and stepping out of them.

"Something like that. But she had hers in High School, too," I replied, taking off my jeans.

"What do you want to do?" Missy asked, taking off her bra.

"That's totally up to you," I replied, slipping off my briefs to free my erection.

"Will you lick me before?" she asked as she slipped off her panties.

"Before what?" I asked with a smirk.

"YOU KNOW WHAT!" Missy exclaimed.

"Before we get dressed and go play video games?" I teased.

"Jesse Block, if you don't lick me then fuck my brains out, you'll be in big trouble!"

"Well, in that case..." I smirked.

We got into bed, and I feasted on her huge breasts, licked her to an orgasm, then proceeded to fuck her brains out as she'd requested. As soon as I recovered, we did the same thing again, but then because she had to be home for dinner, we went to the shower.

"What did you think?" I asked, as I soaped her fantastic breasts.

"OH! MY! GOD!" Missy exclaimed. "You made me feel SO good, both with your tongue and while we were fucking. We HAVE to do this again!"

"I could be persuaded," I teased.

Missy quickly turned and grabbed my sack and squeezed gently, then a bit harder.

"Very persuasive!" I chuckled.

"Thought so!"

"Just for that, next time I'm going to teach you something special!" I declared.

"What's that?" Missy asked.

"Mammary intercourse," I smirked as I soaped her butt.

"Huh?"

"Baby oil or lube on your breasts, you push them together, and I tit fuck you, and cum on your face!"

"NO WAY!" she gasped. "People do that?"

"I mean, what good is it to have 'the most amazing boobs in the whole school' if we don't put them to good use!"

"It just seems strange."

"You told me you read *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*, so that can't be too strange!"

"I, er, uhm, skipped the 'other activities' section. I figured that was like the advanced course."

"Go back and read it and I think a tit fuck won't seem so strange anymore."

"Do you like blowjobs?"

"Is the Pope Polish?" I asked with a grin.

"I don't think the Pope would approve of me giving you a blowjob!"

"Then it's a good thing I don't care what he thinks about it! He doesn't approve of birth control, sex outside of marriage, gays and lesbians, or abortion. So he can shove his opinions on those...in a drawer and close it!"

Missy laughed, "Up his butt?"

"That's about the right place for objecting to those things."

"Doesn't your church object to the same things?"

"Yes, though there are significant differences that I don't think you care too much about! The only reason I mentioned the Pope was to make the joke!"

"When can I see you again?"

"It'll have to be after Thanksgiving," I replied. "Tomorrow Brooke and I do homework together, then Wednesday my friend is coming from Rochester."

"The Monday after Thanksgiving?"

"Sure."

We finished in the shower, dried off, then dressed. We went downstairs and Missy said she was going to hang out with Birgit for a bit in case anyone said anything about where she was. She left just as my moms came home, and the three of us started making dinner.



November 26, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

I ran with Dad and Suzanne on Tuesday morning, and was jealous that she got to shower with him, though cuddling almost made up for it.

"What did the paper say about next door?" I asked.

"That they are holding Mr. Williams, but he hasn't been charged. They did say he and Mrs. Williams had a 'heated argument' on Friday night at the Kenwood Academy football game."

"What will happen to Justus and Kordell?" I asked. "I mean, if Mr. Williams did murder his wife?"

"Justus is a Senior," Dad replied. "So if he's eighteen, he'd be allowed to decide for himself. Kordell is a Sophomore, so he'll likely go to live with relatives. If there is enough money, it might be possible for Justus to become Kordell's guardian."

"What about the house?"

"There is probably a fairly substantial mortgage. Property values have gone up tremendously since Grandpa A and I bought this house almost twenty years ago. It would take two professional incomes, in the upper brackets, to afford the mortgage."

"Or four!" I giggled. "You, my moms, and eventually Suzanne."

"Six, really, because Jennifer and Josie pay rent on the coach house, and they're building equity, so if we ever sell, they'll get a portion of the proceeds."

"You can't sell our house!" I protested. "No way!"

"Relax, Pumpkin! I didn't say I was going to sell it, only that if that were to happen, they'd receive some of the money. If we don't sell, then Jesse would inherit their part, just as you and your siblings would inherit your parts."

"I don't want you to die, Dad!" I said, snuggling close.

"That is the fate of every person who ever lived," I replied. "We just hope it's a long time, but you never know."

"The Swedish Birgit, Stephie, and Jorge, who all died young?"

"Yes, and Frank Spencer and Belinda, though not quite as young. Don Joseph and «Shihan Hiro» lived long lives, and you know Grandpa Adams is eighty-five."

"Let's talk about something else, please," I requested.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I think you know!" I giggled.

"You have a one-track mind, Pumpkin!"

"Right, because Mom doesn't like to fuck or anything! And because you're a monk!"

"No comment," Dad said with a silly smile.

"Oh, please!" I exclaimed, rolling my eyes. "As if *anyone* in this family who is fourteen or older hides the fact that they like sex and lots of it!"

"Perhaps," Dad allowed.

"You can give me a chance to show you!" I giggled.

"Pumpkin..."

"Sorry. It's fun to tease you."

"Breakfast in two minutes," Yuriko called out.

As usual, I got three.

[Oswego, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Matt, can you come to Re-Thanksgiving at my house on Friday?" Arby asked as we walked to the cafeteria for lunch.

"No. Chelsea and I are leaving for Cincinnati immediately after Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday afternoon."

"Bummer."

"Sorry about that. I thought I'd mentioned it."

"You probably did, and I forgot. Are you around during Christmas break?"

"We're going to Cincinnati for three days -- the 27th to the 30th."

"So you're here for New Year's?"

"Yes, though we usually go to my dad's house."

"Josh and I are planning a New Year's party. We wish you would come."

"If Chelsea is OK with it, we can. We don't have a commitment to be at my Dad's house the way we do for Christmas and Boxing Day."

"What do you guys do on Boxing Day?"

"All the grandparents visit, so it's a total madhouse with a dozen grandparents! This year, Eduardo's parents will visit, too, so it'll be crazier than usual."

"All I can say is I'd kill for your dad's setup! I know you don't agree with him."

"Actually, I think what he's doing is perfect for him, just not for me. I love Aunt Kara and Aunt Jessica, and Suzanne is totally cool. And so are Jesse's moms."

"Yeah, but I got the idea your dad had girlfriends, too."

"He does, and again, that's cool for him. I don't want anyone but Chelsea, and I'm not interested in a 'hall pass' or anything like that."

"You wouldn't accept a 'hall pass' if Chelsea offered?"

"First of all, she'd never offer, but in some weird alternate universe where I have a goatee where she did offer one, I'd turn it down."

"*Trek*, right?"

"The episode 'Mirror, Mirror', though the same universe existed in *DS9* in a multi-episode arc."

"Do you watch *Enterprise*?"

"Oh, hell no! It's crap! It breaks canon in serious ways and it's unwatchable for anyone who liked *TNG*, *DS9*, or *TOS*. It's *Galactica 1980* bad!"

Arby laughed, "Your measuring stick for bad Sci-Fi!"

We joined Nick, Josh, Matt W, and Jim at a table to eat, and a minute later, Maggie and Tar sat down with us.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Steve

Early on Tuesday afternoon, *adium* chimed, and I brought up the chat window.

SongOfSolomon7: Hi! It's Little Red Riding Hood!

NIKASteve: Hi! You should change your IM name!

SongOfSolomon7: And you change yours to Big Bad Wolf?.

NIKASteve: Given I use this for work, probably not a good idea! What's up?

SongOfSolomon7: You? 🤔

NIKASteve: I'm at work, so not!

SongOfSolomon7: Want to be? December 7th? I could spend the night.

NIKASteve: I'll be in Ohio. How about the 14th.

SongOfSolomon7: That works! This Sunday is Danielle Liberation Day!

NIKASteve: Just consider carefully what language you use.

SongOfSolomon7: I want to shock them and only those words I used with you will do it.

NIKASteve: So long as you're prepared for the consequences.

SongOfSolomon7: I'll be kicked out of the church. Oh, darn!

NIKASteve: LOL! I know the feeling. I was effectively kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church for the same reason.

SongOfSolomon7: Who did you say that to?

NIKASteve: I meant on account of sex!

SongOfSolomon7: Obviously! Can you pick me up late that Saturday afternoon? Say around 4:00pm.

NIKASteve: Yes. See you then!

SongOfSolomon7: See you!

I minimized the window, finished proofreading my report for Dante, attached it to an email, and sent off to him. Of the five companies, GlucoTech was ranked first, and I felt they were in a very strong position with solid tech and a good business plan. Neapolitan Networks was probably the worst of the five, and struck me as an idealistic startup with no real future, given the big players in the networking game.

In Flight Warning Systems wasn't much better. They had promising tech, but lacked a business plan and I wasn't sure they had the technical chops to bring their product fully to market. The other two, BitPass and CSN Stores, had promising technology, and solid monetization plans. It wasn't clear where either of them would end up, but they did have tech that would make them valuable acquisition targets if they couldn't get to market.

"Steve, can you come see me?" Stephanie asked over the intercom.

"Be right there," I replied.

I got up from my desk and went to my sister's office. She motioned for me to shut the door, which I did, then sat down.

"We have our permits," Stephanie said. "But there's a catch."

"There's always a catch!"

"We need a parking waiver from Alderman Burnett."

"Son of a bitch!"

"Before you go off on Burnett, I spoke with Jackie Ferguson and she said it's supposed to be automatic because we're close enough to a CTA bus line, and that permits are usually issued with preliminary approval, pending the parking waiver."

"Except he committed to full and complete approval. In other words, there wasn't to be any additional back and forth."

"What do you want to do?"

"Well, given our option is to move, which I really don't want to do, let's assume that it's some kind of innocent oversight. I'm suspicious that it's not, but we can find out fairly easily. Have Eve call Burnett's office and ask them to send a copy of the waiver document because it wasn't included in the materials we received from the City. See what his office says. If they say anything other than that they'll send it right over, then I'll call Burnett. If he does *anything* other than sign it and send it over, I call Samantha, Alec, and Ben Jackson and pull the plug on his affordable housing project."

"Do you want Eve to mention that?"

"No. In fact, don't tell Eve, simply say the document is missing and ask her to call to get it, because it is, as you say, automatic."

Stephanie picked up the phone and dialed Eve's number. She explained we had all the permits and approvals, but that the parking variance document we needed from the Alderman was missing, and asked her to place the call.

"All set," Stephanie said. "I have one other thing to discuss."

"What's that?"

"Insurance premiums."

"Do I want to know?" I asked with trepidation.

"Probably not. With the help of our consultants, we've been able to get the increase down to 18% year-over-year."

"Fuck."

"You can guess what the consultant's suggestion was."

I frowned, "Offer an HMO along with the PPO, cover the HMO completely, and only subsidize the PPO plan. No."

"That's what I expected you to say."

"We've never asked single employees, with or without kids, to pay anything, and we've only asked married couples to pay 5% of their premiums. It would feel like a betrayal to offer to pay only for a plan you and I would never, ever select."

"You forego our insurance because of your unique situation."

"I understand, but it's simpler if each of the kids is on their biological mom's plan, which has Elyse and her boys on our plan, Birgit and Stephe on Kara's plan, Albert and Ashley on Jessica's plan, as I am, and Jesse is on Jennifer's plan. And they're all comprable. If they wever weren't, we'd switch them all to NIKA's plan."

"M&M's increase is close to 25% because they're so small and because of the rules against businesses combining for insurance negotiation."

"Total bullshit regulations, but we're stuck with them. What do you want to do?"

"Elyse put together three options, but I know which one you'll back for sure."

"That NIKA eats the cost and we figure out how to increase revenue to compensate. The problem with that, of course, is that premiums are rising faster than we can conceivably raise prices, which we try to hold to about the rate of inflation averaged over three years. What were the other options?"

"The one the consultant recommended, but I know that's a non-starter with you. The other option is we ask all employees to contribute, but we base premium subsidies on salary grade, with larger subsidies for the lowest paid employees."

"Is that legal?"

"Yes."

"Now hit me with what that looks like to an employee's paycheck."

"A mid-range single staffer would see a cost of around 2% of their income. But that's going to happen anyway, because we can't raise fees at a rate high enough to keep up with premiums and other increased costs. It's going to hit the bonus pool and profit sharing, so one way or another, it hurts. It really comes down to where we hit them."

"Bonuses are discretionary, and profit sharing depends on, well, profit. I do NOT like the idea of reducing any employee's paycheck, though I understand married employees who have their spouses on their plans will see a hit. I say we eat the costs and explain the bonus pool in eighteen months. June 2003 bonuses are based on this year's performance, so it won't actually hit them until June 2004."

"Elyse was positive that was what you'd decide. She did warn that it might not be sustainable in the long run, and that at some point we'll likely be forced by economics to go with the HMO/PPO option and only fully cover the HMO premium."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, no hit to take-home pay and we can explain the situation in the financial reports we publish."

Stephanie's phone buzzed, and she put it on speaker.

"Yes, Eve?" my sister said.

"It was an oversight," Eve said. "We'll have the document by tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, Eve. Set up the meeting with Brown Construction, Phelan-Brown, and the executive team."

"Including your brother?"

"He's sitting here with me. Steve?"

"The first meeting, yes. After that, only if there is something that needs political schmoozing, some modification of the financing from Spurgeon, or some serious impediment or delay."

"You heard him," Stephanie said. "Get started on the lease arrangements for space for everyone working in the Annex."

"I'm on it!" Eve declared.

"Thanks," Stephanie replied, disconnecting the call.

"Color me surprised," I said. "'Anything else for me?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then I'm going back to my desk. You, Joel, and the kids are coming to the house on Thursday, right?"

"Of course! Yuriko already verified with us. You're going to need a hell of a lot of turkey!"

"I suggested she put the boys on KP duty peeling potatoes! She and the girls are going to make a mix of American and Japanese desserts, along with something I can eat."

"Besides Yuriko?" Stephanie smirked.

"Watch it, Squirt!" I said menacingly.

"Go back to your Japanese sanctuary! Speaking of which, is that mural movable?"

"You decided on that option?"

"I think it makes the most sense, if we can find a way to do it cost effectively."

"When Siobhán created the mural, she gave me instructions on how the canvas could be taken down so it could be moved. I gave them to Eve yesterday, and we can hire Siobhán as a consultant to supervise moving it. The «tatami» mats are at a point where they should probably be replaced, so it's not really an additional cost. In other words, yes, I'm cool with moving to the fifth floor of the rebuilt Annex along with the rest of the executive staff."

"We'll have another potential round with the City and Alderman when the time comes to rebuild or rehab this space."

"We'll cross that bridge when the new Annex is completed and we've moved," I said. "We can work with this space with minor changes for the short term."

"OK. I'll keep you posted and I'm sure Eve will send you an invite to the meeting."

"Thanks."

I got up and left her office and returned to mine.

"Problems?" Penny asked.

"Just the usual bullshit with regard to insurance premiums."

"How bad?"

"18% year over year."

"Fuck!"

"That's what I said. No out-of-pocket increases except for the married plan where employees contribute a small amount, but it's going to hit profitability, and that affects bonuses and profit sharing in 2004."

"Thinking about socialized medicine?" Penny asked.

"You mean pooling insurance premiums to cover all employee medical care?" I asked.

"You know that's not what I meant!"

"Fine, but call it what it is -- taxpayer funded, single-payer, government-provided healthcare. Then go ask Jess if she wants the same pay and working conditions NHS doctors in the UK have."

"I'm going to say that's a hard 'no'."

"Correct. But, ultimately, in our system, nobody can deny you a medical procedure your doctor recommends. You can be denied insurance coverage, but if you can find a way to pay for it, you can get it. That's not true in centralized, single-payer systems without an option for private payment, which is what some Democrats want -- Medicare for all being one example."

"Not to take up the red banner, but what about people who can't afford that?"

"That's what charity hospitals are about, with the Shriners being a perfect example. And you know NIKA would do everything possible to assist an employee in those circumstances."

"What would you do?"

"Switch from the current disaster to a system where everyone had 'major medical' insurance and had a tax-advantaged account to pay deductibles and pay for preventative care. It's been proposed, but I'm not sure it will pass. Basically, There's a high out-of-pocket cap, then everything would be covered at 100%. The out-of-pocket would come from the tax-advantaged account to which both the employer and employee could contribute, similar to how our 401K plan works."

"Once that was implemented, I'd require all health care providers to post their prices, as well as provide all-in costs for any procedure. None of this BS with the anesthesiologist, the pathologist, the lab, the surgeon, and any other random

entity billing you in addition to the hospital bill. Al was explaining how it all worked and part of it is liability, but part of it is to, in effect, push the blame on third parties."

"They can't even get the airlines, cable companies, or cellular companies to give 'all-in' pricing!" Penny observed. "Or try to buy tickets from Ticket Bastards and then see all the additional bogus fees added on after they quote the ticket price!"

"If I could pass one piece of consumer legislation, it would be that the posted price has to include everything except sales tax, and I'd ditch that in favor of a VAT, so that the price was the price. Period."

"Car dealers would hate you!" Penny declared.

"Illinois passed legislation capping those junk fees, and, of course, nearly every dealer charges *exactly* the cap. But they do have to disclose them, so there is a chance for some competition. But those transactions are always fucked up by trade-in value and financing, not to mention dealer subsidies that consumers don't know about. But enough ranting. We have modules due before the December 15th code freeze!"

Penny laughed, turned back to her keyboard, and her fingers danced over the keys.

 Jesse

"Math homework or integration first?" I asked as we walked into the coach house.

"Integration!" Brooke declared. "It's been four days!"

"Poor baby!" I teased.

I took her hand, led her up to my room and we integrated for about an hour, then showered, dressed, and went downstairs to do our math homework.

"Did you hear they charged Mr. Williams with first degree murder?" she asked.

"No. When did you hear that?"

"Mrs. Madison told us during fifth period. Her husband is a detective."

"That was the homicide detective who talked to us yesterday. Do you know what happened with Justus and Kordell?"

"They went to stay with their uncle who lives in Jackson Park."

"That means they'll still be able to go to Kenwood Academy, though I didn't see them today."

"Mrs. Madison said they'll be back after Thanksgiving. Did you know them?"

"Yeah, but we didn't hang out. Their parents didn't approve of the family structure here at the Compound."

Brooke laughed, "What? Some people have a problem with a guy having three wives and two girlfriends?"

"And me having two moms. They were pretty religious from what I can tell, so you can guess how our entire family went over with them."

"Like a lead balloon! And seriously, it's almost 2003, and NOBODY should care about gay or lesbian couples."

"Tell the Evangelical Christians about that one!" I countered. "And the non-libertarian Republicans. None of them would like my dad's setup, either."

"It's not like he's a cult leader! He's not holding anyone hostage or anything like that!"

"Neither did the Branch Davidians," I said. "And look what Janet Sterno did to them!"

"But wasn't he having sex with underage girls?"

"Let's say he was. What the fuck was the ATF doing raiding the place? Underage girls are not 'Alcohol', 'Tobacco', or 'Firearms'. But that claim was never proved, and, honestly, laws about teenage sex are stupid in most states; Europe is saner. But let's say that it was true; the local Sheriff was on good terms with David Koresh and talked to him regularly. The Branch Davidians caused nobody any trouble at all. If there were problems with underage girls, then that's a LOCAL issue, not a federal issue. Age of consent laws are state concerns, and I don't think anyone ever proposed Mann Act charges against him.

"So the FBI and ATF had NO jurisdiction. They went after him and murdered everyone in the compound, just as they murdered Randy Weaver's wife and son at Ruby Ridge. And remember, Randy Weaver was acquitted of all charges except missing his original court date and violating his bail conditions. Not to mention the sniper violated the Constitution when he used deadly force. AND on top of that, both Weaver and another guy were paid by the government to settle their lawsuits. Weaver's daughters got something like a million bucks each, and both Weaver and the other guy had six-figure payouts from the government. What does THAT tell you?"

"Nothing good."

"And in the case of the Branch Davidians, ALL the convictions relating to 'machine guns' were overturned on appeal, so in the end, they were jailed for defending against a ninja-style raid by the ATF who went after them on a pretext. And there is ample evidence the government fired first."

"Are you anti-government?" Brooke asked.

"No, I'm anti-stupidity, anti-authoritarianism, and a pacifist. Remember, the Sheriff could have gone out there and talked to them, or called Koresh and asked him to come in. Not to mention Koresh went into town unarmed and the ATF or FBI could have arrested him there. Whatever crimes they committed, they didn't deserve to be murdered by the government."

"But didn't they set the fire?"

"There were something like a dozen cases of teargas causing fires before Waco. The FBI knew and used pyrotechnic teargas canisters. They *denied* using them and changed their story when they got caught out. Not to mention using military equipment and escalating instead of de-escalating. Of course, the government cleared itself of any wrongdoing."

"Of course!" Brooke agreed emphatically.

"Let's do our math homework," I suggested.

"And maybe we'll have time for one more integration!"

LV. You're Just No Fun, Dad!

November 27, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Hi!" Scarlett exclaimed when she came into the arrival hall at Midway after her flight from Rochester.

"Hi!" I replied as we exchanged a quick hug. "Any bags?"

"Just my carryon."

"Then let's go. I have my Dad's BMW parked across the street."

"Must be nice!"

She let me take her bag, then I took her hand, and we began walking.

"I did say it's my dad's car, not mine! That's *years* away! And I'm thinking Mustang or Camaro is more like it."

"I like both those cars! Changing topics, are you still planning on going to UW Madison?"

"That's the plan, though I don't have to decide for another year. Why?"

"I was thinking about applying to UW for my Master's when I graduate in three years."

"Because of me?"

"Partly, but it's a good program, too."

"You know I'm not ready to make any promises to anyone, right?"

"Sure, and it's three years from now, so you'll be at UW for a year before I graduate. You know how much I like you."

"I do, and I like you a lot, too. But I'm only sixteen."

Scarlett laughed, "And as you pointed out several times when you were in Rochester, you are not a typical sixteen-year-old!"

"And you know I want to be careful not to hurt you or mislead you. I have no clue what will happen once I get to college, and all we can do is wait and see."

"This is not a statement of regret or anything like that, simply an observation -- it's a function of dating a guy who's three years younger and still in High School."

"To put a slightly different spin on it," I offered, "you're only a Sophomore in college and have four-and-a-half years of school before you finish your Master's. College is about getting an education but also having new and interesting experiences so you can figure out what you want from life. I think too many kids focus too much on being couples, and because of that, they miss meeting and getting to know interesting people, and potentially miss out on their best possible life partner."

"Is that code for saying you want a setup like your dad's?"

"No. I think my moms are a better model, but that's my choice. What Dad does is fine for him and his wives and girlfriends and I don't have a problem with it. It's just not for me. For now, I like my freedom, because I can talk to anyone and hang out with anyone and I don't have to worry about my partner being jealous or upset."

"Which has the advantage of being able to sleep with anyone you want whenever you want," Scarlett declared.

"My first comment is that it takes two to tango, so it's not just about what I want. Secondly, High School and college are about figuring out how you can live a fulfilling, productive, happy life. In my mind, that means getting an education, meeting people, discovering new ideas, visiting new places, and finding out what makes you happy. I don't think you can do that in a committed relationship, or even in an exclusive one.

"That said, I will happily acknowledge that Matthew and Chelsea belong together, and always have, and for *them*, it made zero sense to even date anyone else, let alone kiss another person. Heck, if Francesca's mom hadn't completely lost her shit about the fact that Francesca had entered puberty, that might have been me. But, in the end, I concluded being a free agent, if you will, is the best approach for me. As the saying goes, your mileage may vary."

"I sounded a bit catty, didn't I?"

"I didn't take it that way. Your position appears to be more in line with the typical Midwestern American girl's typical outlook. And there's nothing wrong with it, so long as you don't expect everyone to do things your way. My sister Birgit does expect that, and that hasn't worked out as well for her as she would have liked!"

"You mean not being able to find a steady boyfriend? Or being perceived as 'easy'."

I chuckled, "Birgit does not want a steady boyfriend and doesn't care who knows she's having sex. It's more about wanting to control literally everything and everyone around her. You can imagine how well that has worked out!"

"Not very well, I imagine."

"The universe does not bow to her, no matter how much she wants it to, which annoys her to no end. Going back to us, all I can do is tell you my philosophy and my approach to life, and what I can offer. What happens at that point is up to you."

"I wasn't upset with you," Scarlett said, squeezing my hand. "I just want you to know how much I like you and that I could see a future together."

"And maybe that future happens," I replied. "I'm not saying 'never', I'm saying 'not now'."

We reached the car, got in, and headed for the Compound.

"Can I ask something about your family that we never discussed?" Scarlett inquired.

"Sure, though I might not be able to answer."

"I was just curious if your dad was like you when he was in High School and college."

"The opposite! He was looking for a wife from the time he was fourteen and that caused all kinds of trouble because he would obsess about it and mess things up."

It didn't help that Mom One was lesbian but fighting it because of the repressive environment in Milford in the 70s. She and Dad were talking seriously about marriage in tenth grade, and planned to go to college together in Chicago. That all blew up for a host of reasons, and then Dad found Aunt Kara, but they had all kinds of problems and when they eventually got back together, they both wanted another person in the relationship, and they found Aunt Jessica. Basically, every time Dad tried to be exclusive and committed, something very bad happened, including his first serious girlfriend dying."

"Whoa!" Scarlett gasped. "What happened?"

"Birgit Andersson died in a boating accident in the Baltic Sea near Stockholm when they were both fifteen. Dad was in the US when that happened. Later, in college, when he was basically committed to a girl named Stephie, she went back to her first love, but later died of ovarian cancer."

"Hang on a sec! Your sisters are named for your dad's former girlfriends who died?"

"I *told* you my family was different! Pretty much all the adults have some very interesting story about their past. Aunt Jess hid the identity of her real father until after she was married; my Grandpa A was in the CIA; my brother Albert's step-grandma died on 9/11; and so on."

"My family is SO boring by comparison! Nobody has done anything exciting."

"Gee, thanks," I said flatly.

Scarlett laughed, "I didn't mean that! In fact, I'm pretty sure my parents did that!"

"Well, you can pretty much bet on the fact that if your parents never had any children, neither will you!"

"Wait! If my parents never have children, I wouldn't be here!"

"Therefore, it's true that you wouldn't have any children!"

"You are a nut, Jesse!"

"Thank you!" I chuckled.

At home, we went into the coach house, said 'hi' to my moms, then went up to my room to get reacquainted.



November 28, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"What do you have planned today, Pumpkin?" Dad asked as we snuggled after running on Thanksgiving morning.

"The same as every Thanksgiving! I'll be baking cookies and pies with Mom and my sisters and then cooking with Yuriko, my sisters, and Suzanne. There's a lot to do to feed twenty-two people!"

"Who's peeling the sack of potatoes?"

"Matthew volunteered, and Michael will help him. Jesse and Albert will set up the dining room. I wish we could have sailors. That was fun."

"Albert was complaining about the 'security theater' last night at dinner."

"It's so dumb, Dad! What place could be safer than here? And sending them all to a banquet hall where they publish the name and address days before? How can the government be so dumb?"

"You know the answer."

"The same idiots who lined up the planes wingtip-to-wingtip to make easy targets at Pearl Harbor!"

"Those were military, not government. But they are a result of the same process."

"People vote for the politicians who make the most promises to either shovel money at them or guarantee they'll be safe, both of which are detrimental to everyone's rights."

"You've been listening," Dad chuckled.

"Yes, but you don't listen to *me*!" I groused.

Dad laughed, "I do listen, but I don't do what you say, much to your annoyance."

"You do everything Liz says! And you pay her to tell you what to do! I'll do it for free!"

Dad laughed, "On that topic, someone once said that marriage is the most expensive way there is to have sex for free!"

"I don't want to marry you, Dad!" I declared. "On the other hand..."

"Breakfast is ready," Mom called out. "And you need to come right away because we have a lot of work to do!"

"Grrr!" I growled but got up, because I knew she was right.

Dad and I followed her to the kitchen, and I made myself a plate with bacon, eggs, and toast. It was crowded in the kitchen because Aunt Elyse, Eduardo, Matthew, Chelsea, and Michael had come to the house early, and Jesse, his moms and Scarlett had joined us for breakfast as well. Aunt Stephanie, Joel, and my cousins would show up later in the morning.

"Scarlett, do you want to help us bake?" I asked.

"I am the world's worst in the kitchen!" Scarlett declared.

"You can still help," Ashley offered. "We can teach you. I'm sure Jesse can find something to do with our brothers and cousin."

"Which cousin?"

"David. My Aunt Stephanie's son. That's my dad's sister. We have a girl cousin, Patty, who's his little sister, and when she gets here, she'll help, too, even though she's only six."

"No boys in the kitchen?" Scarlett asked. "I thought you were all about being enlightened."

"Keeping boys out of the kitchen IS enlightened!" I declared, causing all the girls to laugh and all the boys to roll their eyes. "But Matthew and Michael will do KP by peeling the potatoes!"

"Dad is an awesome cook," Ashley said. "But we girls do all the baking. Dad will help with the turkey later, though Yuriko as taken over the kitchen as you would expect a proper Japanese girl to do!"

"Exactly right, Birgit-chan!" Yuriko said with a smile.

"I usually am!" I giggled, causing almost everyone else in the kitchen to groan.

 Steve

"How are you doing?" Jennifer asked, coming into my study after I'd put the two turkeys in the double ovens.

"I take it that's not just a polite question and you want a proper answer."

"It's not, and I do."

"Mary Whittaker is investigating dopamine as a potential cause for my condition and devising a set of tests for February."

Jennifer laughed softly, "As if there was any question of you being driven by pleasure seeking!"

I chuckled, "I won't deny it, and that is the popular understanding of dopamine, but clinically, it's most likely motivational salience, that is, driving behavior towards an object or an outcome."

"All kidding aside, that actually fits. What is she thinking?"

"That there is some kind of irregularity in dopamine production that causes what appear to be manic episodes. And if that's true, then it's likely something to do with dopamine precursors, which are amino acids found in proteins, or it could be that the enzymes that break down dopamine are out of balance. There are several diseases, including Parkinson's disease, that are caused by dopamine degeneration."

"Is there a treatment?"

"Maybe. The main problem is that dopamine cannot pass the blood / brain boundary, so taking dopamine cannot have a direct effect. It would be the metabolic pathways for synthesis that would have to be addressed. And that's assuming that's the problem, which it might not be. Well, everyone who has looked at my files is sure it's related to my hypothalamus, but nobody knows for sure exactly what the proximate cause is."

"How did Mary come up with the dopamine idea?"

"She didn't. One of Jessica's friends, Doctor Mike Loucks, came up with it."

"Endocrinologist?"

"Trauma surgeon. He's Chief Attending at Rutherford Regional Hospital in Ohio."

"How the heck does a trauma surgeon come up with that? And why was he looking at your records?"

"We're acquaintances, have a mutual nemesis, and mutual friends besides Jess. When I saw him in March, he asked for copies of my records because he was curious."

"He was here?"

"No, I was visiting Rutherford for the investments I have there, one of which is the motel his sister and her husband own."

"Who's your mutual nemesis?"

"A Kent van der Meer clone that Doctor Mike had a run-in with in college."

"Your kind of run-in?" Jennifer asked with a smirk.

I chuckled, "I don't think so, but you never know. I do know they had a theological debate. At the time, Doctor Mike was an undergrad and a subdeacon in the Russian Orthodox Church and mopped the floor with the evangelical youth pastor who was harassing gay and lesbian kids on campus."

"There are too many bigoted assholes in the world."

"According to Jess, a member of the church where the 'bigoted asshole' was youth pastor murdered one of Doctor Mike's closest friends for being gay. Life in prison without parole."

"When was that?"

"In the late 80s; Jess could give you more details. She did tell me that in one of those karmic moments, Mike was part of a medical team that treated the murderer after he'd been beaten and raped in prison."

"That's Josh Benton level karma, though I wouldn't wish rape on anyone."

"Me, either. I'll see Doctor Mike when we're in Rutherford in a week. Jess arranged for us to have dinner with him and his family."

"Was that the reason for the trip?"

"No. Paul Reynolds invited us to stay in the new suites they built before the grand opening in January. SKJ Partners provided the funding. But enough about me; how are you?"

"Living the boring life of an urban lesbian mom!"

"Being Jesse's mom cannot possibly be boring!"

"Well, there are vicarious thrills!"

"Seeing CeCe in the sauna?"

"Don't remind me. Holy God, is she hot!"

"Kara called her 'scrumptious'," I said.

"CeCe and Jesse are on the outs, if you didn't know."

I knew, but revealing *how* I knew was a concern, though I was very tempted to make Jennifer insanely jealous. I didn't usually discuss things except with my wives, but this was Jennifer, my first real confidante, and I knew she'd never reveal my confidence.

"I know," I said with a sly smile. "I ran into her on my trip to Arizona."

"You didn't!" Jennifer gasped, her eyes wide.

"Eat your heart out, Jen," I said smugly.

"You...you...dog!"

I chuckled, "I understand why you're jealous. Those long legs!"

"But..."

"She made it clear that she and Jesse are done and she's been dating at Arizona State. Jesse and I spoke about the concept when Libby was seriously flirting with me. He told her, and me, that it was up to her, and nothing would change except that he'd never sleep with her again."

"Tempted?"

"We are talking about me, Jen!" I chuckled. "But I believe she chose Jesse over me. And that neither surprises me nor bothers me in any way."

"I bet she'd be a wildcat in bed," Jennifer smirked.

"You'll have to ask our son, who, I'm positive, would give you all the details you don't want to hear!"

"I told you about that little turkey when he and CeCe were in bed!"

"He is our kid, Jen! Though that's more shades of Melanie in High School."

"And when Birgit and some random boy come to breakfast naked?"

"She's done that already by herself!" I chuckled.

"Age three is different from age fourteen with a paramour! She'll do that to yank your chain for the same reason Jesse said it was OK to open his door while he and CeCe were lying naked without the covers on!"

"Got your cheap thrill, did you?" I grinned.

"I would never admit that to Jesse!"

"But you just did to me!"

"What do your daughters like to say to things like that? What-e-ver!"

"You know I love you, Jen. I always have and I always will."

"I love you, too, Steve. Even when you make me insanely jealous!"

 Matthew

"Me and my big mouth!" I complained to Michael as I peeled the eighteenth potato.

"I think I'll invent a potato-peeling robot!" Michael replied, having peeled about an equal number. "But it seems as if we're done."

"The bag is empty, so unless someone runs to the store, there aren't any more to peel! I'll take the peelings to Aunt Kara's compost pile. You take the potatoes to Yuriko."

"OK!" Michael agreed.

I combined the peelings from the two bowls into one and took them to the backyard, while Michael took the large container with the peeled potatoes to the kitchen. I dumped the peelings on the compost pile, used the pitchfork to turn it, then went back inside, getting the other bowl and taking them to the kitchen.

"Do you need anything else, Yuriko?" I asked.

"Not now, thank you, Matthew-chan; thank you Michael-chan."

"You're welcome!" I replied. "Michael, let's go hang out with Albert, Jesse, and David."

We left the kitchen and went up to Albert's room so we could play video games.

 Steve

"I am thankful for our extended family and our guest, Scarlett, being here," I said when everyone gathered in the dining room mid-afternoon.

Chelsea was 'extended family' at this point, even though the kids weren't formally engaged. That really was only a technicality, as there was no doubt in my mind that they were together for life, and unless there was an accidental pregnancy somewhere along the way, would have my first grandkids.

Yuriko and Natalie were considered extended family, too, not guests, though eventually Yuriko would return to Japan and Natalie would leave us for school in Russia.

"Jesse wants to say a blessing before we eat," I continued.

"O Lord, bless the food and drink of Thy servants, for Thou art holy unto the ages of ages," Jesse said.

"Amen!" everyone intoned, even though Jesse was the only serious believer in the entire group.

We began passing food, and I passed on the mashed potatoes and stuffing, but Ashley had made rolls with almond flour, so I could have those. I had no limit on turkey, and the girls had made a salad, as well as broccoli, so I had plenty of food, despite my diet.

"Albert, I hear you're flying to St. Louis tomorrow," Eduardo said.

"Yes, with Aimee and Nicholas."

"Will you do all the flying?"

I saw Albert glance at his mom before he answered.

"As much as Aimee thinks I'm capable of doing, and there are controls in front of each pilot's seat, so she can take over at any time."

"He means she'll let him taxi, take off, fly, land, and taxi," Jessica said. "Albert, it's OK to say it. I know you've done that before."

"What's the problem, Jessica?" Eduardo asked.

"The best trauma surgeon in the country is still, at her core, a mom!" I said with a smile.

"When can you get your pilot's license?" Scarlett asked.

"When I turn seventeen," Albert replied. "That's July 2006."

"Are you the only one who flies?"

"Yes. You know Jesse plays hockey, obviously. My sisters practice karate, and Birgit just earned her black belt. Matthew is in drama and on the speech team, and Michael is a robotics expert."

"I don't know about being an expert," Michael said. "But I'm pretty good at it. We're building a robot for a competition in January now. I think we have a great chance of winning."

"Scarlett, what's your major?" Kara asked.

"History, with an education minor. I'm going to get a Master's, then teach High School while I work on a PhD, and eventually teach at a university."

"Are you staying in Rochester for your Master's?"

"I'm looking at other schools, but I'm only a Sophomore, so I have a few years before I have to decide."

The conversation continued, with everyone giving updates, and when we finished our main course, my sons cleared the table, then Yuriko, Ashley, and Stephie served dessert. When we finished dessert, Joel, Eduardo, and I did the dishes.

"Dad," Matthew said as I washed a serving platter, "Chelsea and I are leaving for Cincinnati."

"Have a safe trip, and please call your mom when you arrive."

"She made that clear!"

"Then have fun!"



November 29, 2002, Cincinnati, Ohio

 Matthew

"What are you doing today?" Aunt Jennie asked as Chelsea and I ate breakfast on Friday morning.

"In about an hour, Pavel and Larisa will be here, along with some of Larisa's friends, to go to the Zoo."

"Who all is coming?" I asked.

"Her friends Abi Greene, Rachel Loucks, Viktoria Kozlov, and April Webber, plus April's boyfriend Michael Nixon. They're all around your age."

"What about your other friends?" Aunt Jennie asked.

"We'll see all of them tomorrow, and everyone will have their boyfriends with them. Today was something Pavel and Larisa had planned, and she invited us."

We finished our breakfast and then Pavel, Larisa, and their friends arrived in two minivans. There was room for us, so we climbed into the one being driven by Abi, while Pavel was driving the other van.

"Matt, meet Abi, Rachel, and Viktoria," Larisa declared.

She shut the door, and went to the other van and got it.

"Hi!" I said. "Do you all go to church with Pavel or Larisa?"

"Everyone but me," Abi replied. "I'm the token heathen!"

I laughed, "I don't go to church, either."

"Heathens have much more fun!" Abi declared.

"You are SO bad, Abi Greene!" Rachel declared.

"I know!" Abi declared with a mischievous smile.

[2600 feet over Central, Illinois]

 Albert

"I have a bit of yaw," I announced.

"The wind shifted," Commander Aimee said. "Use very gentle rudder movements."

"Not trim?"

"It's not enough of a problem to worry about it, and the winds are likely to shift again. Unless it's a major crosswind, rudder is your best option."

I continued flying for another ten minutes, using minor rudder adjustments to keep on course. When that was no longer necessary, I asked Commander Aimee about Nicholas.

"He can swap seats with you for a few minutes," Commander Aimee replied.

"Do you want to fly, Nicholas?" I asked.

"Mom will lose her mind!" Nicholas replied.

"My mom was like that too, at first," I replied. "And you don't have to tell her."

"I can't lie to her," Nicholas said.

"She and my dad are on good terms again, right?"

"Yes."

"He'll talk her off the ledge! He did that with my mom, too. Take a turn for five or ten minutes. Commander, your aircraft."

"My aircraft," Commander Aimee said.

I unbuckled and got out of the co-pilot chair and carefully traded places with Nicholas. I helped him buckle his belt and put on the headset.

"Keep your feet off the pedals," Commander Aimee said. "And when I tell you, just grab the wheel loosely, but don't move it."

"OK," Nicholas said nervously.

"When I say 'your aircraft', you reply 'my aircraft' and then you hold the wheel and you're flying. Only use slow, gentle motions, and only what I tell you. OK?"

"OK."

"Your aircraft," Commander Aimee said, releasing her wheel.

"My aircraft," Nicholas said tentatively, taking hold of the wheel.

"Now, very, very gently, turn right until the compass says 190°. Don't worry if you go past it, just slowly turn back. You'll get the hang of it."

I remembered the first time I had flown, and how difficult it had seemed. Nicholas had similar trouble, but he didn't lose control or freak out, and after about ten minutes of following Aimee's instructions, she took control and I moved back to the co-pilot's seat.

"Your aircraft," she said once I was situated.

"My aircraft," I confirmed.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Just remember what Miyu and I taught you," Dad said as we walked towards Alumni Hall at DePaul. "Miyu for technique and me for mental approach."

"You make me mental!" I giggled.

"I think that's congenital!" Dad teased.

"Which makes it YOUR fault!"

"Get your game face on, and stay focused."

"Yes, Sensei Dad! What do I get if I win?"

"A medal!" Dad said with a smirk.

"You're just no fun, Dad!"

"I think I'm going to declare Penny *persona non grata*!" Dad said.

"Oh, please! What *more* could she tell me?"

Dad laughed, "I suspect not much."

We entered the building, and I went to the locker room to change, and Dad went to the judges' room.

"Hi, Birgit!" Jacqui, who was 2nd Dan at our dojo, called out when I walked in.

"Hi!" I replied and went to a locker so I could change into my gi.

Joleen came in a minute later and when the three of us were dressed in our uniforms, we went to the gym to wait for Sensei Ichirou to start the competition. It was about fifteen minutes later when Dad took his position at the tournament director's podium and Sensei Ichirou led us in a moment of silent meditation, and then we said the *Pledge of Allegiance*.

When we finished, I went to my first bout, which was against a seventeen-year-old girl from a dojo in Rockford. She was about my height, so she wouldn't have a reach advantage, which meant we were basically evenly matched physically, though she weighed a bit more than I did. I didn't feel that would make any difference, so I decided to use the tactic of a quick first strike to see if I could catch her off guard. It worked, and I scored the first point, then traded points with her to win the round.

For the second round, I changed tactics and let her attack, but I managed to deflect her blows and score the first point with a counter-strike. We traded points after that, and I won the second round, which meant I won the match.

"You're good," the girl, whose name was Kelly, said. "Where's your dojo?"

"Hyde Park."

"Your dad is Tournament Director, right? The 6th Dan?"

"Yes," I replied.

"He doesn't spar?"

"Not in competition."

"Did he train you?" Kelly asked.

"Some," I replied, "but mostly it was one of his best students, Miyu, who's been champion three times. She's pregnant, so she can't compete in this tournament."

"Is your dojo close to the University?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I'm going there next year. Your dad is the sensei, right?"

"He's a sensei, but not the «shihan». «Shihan» Will runs the dojo and my dad is his advisor. Are you thinking of transferring?"

"Yes."

"Come with me and I'll introduce you to Sensei Will."

"Thanks!"

 Steve

"When do you think I'll be ready to compete?" Avanti asked as she and I walked to a diner to have lunch.

"You're an orange belt, so you could compete now. Normally, you'd train with Miyu, but she's not able to spar for obvious reasons! I'd need to clear it with «Shihan» Will, but Birgit could work with you until Miyu is ready."

"Not you?"

"It's better to work with someone who has actually sparred competitively. I never have."

"If that's what you think is best, that's what I'll do!" Avanti declared. "Why isn't Birgit eating with us?"

"She has a new friend from another dojo who is going to UofC next year, and they're with some other girls from that dojo."

"And Dad is kicked to the curb that quickly? Wow!"

"I'd be careful, if I were you, given it worked to your advantage!"

"Perhaps I need to be disciplined!" Avanti teased.

"Hmm," I said with a sly smile, "A three month delay?"

"If that is what you feel is best as my guru," Avanti replied with a sly smile of her own.

"Actually, we should discuss that," I said as we entered the diner.

I asked for a booth that was at the far end of the room, which would afford us some privacy, and the hostess seated us there. We ordered, and after the waitress brought our drinks, we continue the conversation.

"What did you think we need to discuss?"

"Our plans. Is everything still set with your parents' trip?"

"Yes. I plan to come to your house on Friday, though according to your rule we can't do anything until after midnight. I cleared that with your wives when I spoke to them."

"Then that's what we'll do."

"I'm very much looking forward to it!" Avanti said.

"As am I!"

 Birgit

I won my next two matches, then performed my kata flawlessly. I believed I would win that part of the competition for the under-eighteen group, but I needed to win my three matches on Saturday to be overall champion. I made some new friends besides Kelly, who would start training at our dojo once she started college at UofC. The other girls, Miley and Andrea, were from Sensei Ichirou's dojo and were both fifteen.

"You did very well today, Pumpkin," Dad said as he and I drove home late on Friday afternoon.

"You saw?"

"Yes. I could move so that I could observe, and I had permission to stand at the door of the room where you demonstrated your kata.

"Do you think I'll win?"

"I think you have a very good chance, and I'm confident you'll do your best. The real question is do *you* think you'll win?"

"There's one guy who's seventeen who is taller," I said.

"What did you learn from sparring with me?"

"Besides the fact that I liked being pinned to the mat?" I teased.

"Besides that, young lady!"

"I'm not sure," I replied. "You were so fast and moved like a cat. Miyu doesn't move as fast as you do, and I don't think the tall guy is that fast, he just has a longer reach."

"What did we discuss last time?"

"About stepping inside his strikes. Can we go to the dojo so we can practice?"

"Well, Commander Fitzmaurice is with the Navy men, and your sisters are entertaining Elizabeth, so that would be OK. Call your mom and let her know that we're going to the dojo.

"Thanks, Dad."

[Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Matthew

"Your friend Abi is crazy!" I said to Chelsea after Abi dropped us at Aunt Jennie's house.

"I've actually only met her once, during Senior year. The same with the other girls. They're all Larisa's friends, and I met her through Marcie during Junior year. Why do you think she's crazy?"

"She'd fit right in at the compound! She reminds me of Birgit, and all the other kids are more like us."

"You and Michael do seem to be more traditional than everyone else there except maybe Stephe."

"Stephie agrees with me on being with one person for our whole lives. She just needs to give Nicholas his space until he comes around, which I'd bet will be in the next year or two."

"You figured out I was OK by the time you were eight!"

"As a friend! And you weren't living in the same house with me."

"When did you start thinking about us being together that way?"

"I knew it would happen because we all knew about sex from the time we were little, but if you mean when I did I want to? Around my thirteenth birthday. That's when the hormones kicked in! And you?"

"I knew I wanted to eventually go to bed with you from the time I met you, but desire came when you started filling out, so not long before your fourteenth birthday."

"Cradle robber!" I teased.

"Women live longer than men on average, so it makes sense! I'm only three-and-a-half years older, and in ten years, nobody will care."

"They would now, for sure."

"Which is why we don't even hold hands in public. But we're not IN public! Take me to my room and make love to me?"

"I could be persuaded!" I replied.

"I'll give you a blowjob for every time you make love to me!"

"Sold!"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"I'm going to slow down a bit," Dad said. "And spar the way a 1st Dan would. Your goal is to find a way to score points on me."

"Any advice?" I asked.

"Don't get hit!" Dad said with a grin.

"Gee, thanks," I groused.

We put on sparring pads, bowed to Sensei Hiro's shrine, then stretched a bit to warm up.

"Begin!" Dad said once we had taken our places in the middle of the training room.

"No pins, right?" I asked as we began moving.

"No pins," Dad confirmed, then used his reach to strike my solar plexus but then easily avoided being hit by my counter-punch.

"Grrr!" I growled.

"Rather than try to simply block, turn sideways, sidestep, then use a backfist circular strike."

"But you'll know I'm going to do it," I said.

"I won't block, but pull the punch, please."

Dad made a strike at a slower speed than I knew he could achieve, and I quickly changed to a side stance, sidestepped towards him, and landed the back of my hand on Dad's chest.

"Good. Let's keep doing that until you can do it smoothly."

I tried five more times before Dad nodded.

"Your technique is good enough to land that punch at full strength," Dad said.

"Why haven't you taught me this before?" I asked.

"You're a brand-new black belt! Next up is learning balance, center of gravity, and how to move like a cat."

I'd be VERY happy to show him my moves with my 'cat'! But if I made a joke about sex, he'd tell me to stop. Of course, that didn't mean I wouldn't do it!

"Is this where I make a totally inappropriate joke about my 'cat'?" I smirked.

"This is where you learn another technique!" Dad said.

I knew plenty of techniques, both karate and otherwise! But I also knew if I didn't focus on karate, I was going to lose a match and not be champion. But it had been almost two weeks since I'd had sex and I was starting to go crazy.

"What's bugging you?" Dad asked.

"After we train, OK?" I asked, because I didn't want to derail our session.

Dad and I worked on two more sequences and I hoped that a repertoire of three would be enough to score points on the taller guy. I knew I should have asked sooner, but what Dad was teaching me now were things only black belts learned. About an hour after we'd started, we took off our pads, and instead of going to the shower right away, we sat on one of the benches along the wall.

"What's bugging you?" Dad asked.

"I can talk to you about anything, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Boys," I replied.

"All boys? Or just some specific ones?"

"Peter, Bob, and Philip."

"I'm going to guess this has to do with them not being available in the way you want them to be."

"I thought guys were always interested in sex!" I complained.

Dad laughed, which was annoying.

"Girls, too!" he replied. "But that's not your *real* complaint, is it?"

"No," I sighed. "How did you make it work with girls who wanted more from you than you could give?"

"With great difficulty," Dad replied. "We talked about Michelle and Annie, but I should probably tell you about Becky, Dona, and Anna."

Dad described the situations with them, and all the problems that had occurred, and I realized that there were parallels with my life, and even though he was more circumspect about it, with Jesse as well.

"Jesse has had similar problems," I observed. "Francesca, Viktoria, CeCe, Marta, and other girls."

"I suspect you're right, but let's keep the focus on you and me, please."

"Well," I smirked.

"Birgit," Dad said in his gentle voice, "what you wanted was exactly what Philip wanted from you, and I think you should see the parallel. You and I couldn't do what you wanted because I couldn't be what you wanted, and if we had, you'd have been devastated when it ended, and it would have had to end. I love your moms, and that's not going to change. And if we go back to your guys, all three of them had different reasons."

"Not really," I replied. "Well, Bob's was different, but Philip and Peter had the same problem -- me not wanting to be their girlfriend. And, really, with Bob, it was because Philip wanted to be my boyfriend."

"From what you've said about Philip, I believe 'expected' is a better word."

"I know," I sighed. "But he assumed things that weren't true."

"And I'm going to point out something Bethany has said -- differences in age and experience can be a problem. I don't see that as starkly or in nearly as extreme as she does, but with Philip, you were the one who should have exercised better judgment."

"Do you think I abused him?" I asked.

Dad was quiet for a moment before he answered.

"I think that might be too strong a word," Dad said. "But I think you did mistreat him, even if he consented and enjoyed what you did."

"So what do I do?"

"Learn from your mistakes and do better in the future. Just like with karate. Did you send him the card?"

"Yes. I mailed it on Wednesday. I don't think it will do any good, but I apologized for our misunderstanding."

"Good. Ready for showers?"

"Together?" I asked hopefully, even though I knew the answer.

"You know why we can't," Dad replied.

I did, but I also didn't. Whatever it was that Ashley thought she had figured out was probably the real reason, and I still didn't know what it was.

"You're just no fun, Dad!"

LVI. You're Stalling

November 30, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

On Saturday morning, I won my first bout against a boy from Springfield, and felt confident I could meet the challenge of the much taller boy from Sensei Sharon's dojo. He had just barely scraped into the 'under eighteen' classification, as his birthday was on Monday. Two more days and he would have had to compete in the college/young adult group or the 'open' classification, which determined the overall tournament champion.

My focus was on winning the under-eighteen championship, and to do that, I had to win against Kevin, who'd had his black belt since February. As I prepared, I had to stop myself from giggling when I thought about Dad and Aunt Jennifer using 'strip chess' to psych out their opponents. But if I said or did anything like that, and an official heard me, I'd be disqualified and in big trouble with Sensei Ichirou, which would make dad very unhappy.

I took my place at the edge of the mat and waited to be called. My mom, my sisters, and Yuriko were all in attendance, along with most of Dad's students and several others from the Dojo. I was the only one left from our dojo in the 'under-eighteen' group, and only Jacquelyn and Joleen were left in the 'open' group. The way the brackets worked, they would only have to face each other in the finals if they both made it.

My name was called, and I stepped forward to the center of the matt, clearing my mind and relaxing my muscles. Being tense was a sure way to lose, because I was only going to win by being faster than Kevin. After Kevin was called, the referee

reminded us of the rules, then put his hand between us, waited a few seconds, then called 'Begin!'.

One thing I couldn't do was get back to the edge of the mat, because that would make dodging or escaping almost impossible, so I sidestepped slightly, to limit Kevin's options for his right hand, as it would have to cross in front of his body. He copied my move a split second later, so I feinted right and sidestepped left, making it easy to block Kevin's first strike.

I prepared for the move Dad had taught me, and Kevin did exactly what I expected, so I quickly moved to a side stance, used my left arm to block away his right jab and hit Kevin square in the chest with a backfist circular strike. He was surprised, so I took advantage and kicked him in the midsection, scoring two quick points. That caused him to back up and reset, which meant I had position, as I had more mat behind me than he did, and on his next strike, I jumped back then performed a spinning kick which just barely caught him in the side, giving me a 3-0 victory in the first round.

We reset for the second round and I knew he'd be better prepared, as he'd seen my two best moves. I knew I had to surprise him, and I came up with a plan. I dodged, bobbed, and weaved, but he scored two points using his reach and managed to block my attempt to land another backfist circular strike. Given he was leading 2-0, I was sure he wouldn't expect me to be aggressive, so when he threw his next combination, I dropped to a crouch and swung my right leg in a sweep that caught him just behind the knee, and because he wasn't balanced, I knocked him off his feet for a takedown to win the match.

"KNEE STRIKE!" his coach immediately objected.

"No," the referee said, "her foot was completely behind his leg, and that was legal."

"PROTEST!" he announced.

I wanted to roll my eyes, but instead did what we were supposed to do, and knelt at the edge of the mat to wait. Dad came over, but had to call Sensei Ichirou to make the ruling because of the father-daughter relationship. Sensei Ichirou asked the referee and both judges, and all three of them agreed. Sensei Ichirou rejected the protest, and I was declared the winner.

Kevin and I bowed to each other, and he followed me off the mat.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "It was a fair strike. My coach is fanatical."

"Mine, too!" I declared.

"Your dad?"

"No. His top student, Miyu, who's here, but isn't competing because she's about to have a baby. Maybe you'd like a rematch sometime?"

"That would be cool. What grade are you in?"

I almost groaned because he was a Senior, for sure.

"Freshman," I replied.

"Er, maybe it's not such a hot idea," he said. "I don't want to upset your dad."

"For sparring? I do that all the time with older «karateka». He won't object, and wouldn't even object if you asked me out!"

"You're allowed to date?"

I wanted to say that I was allowed to *fuck*, but given where we were and the fact that I'd just met Kevin, I decided that was a bad idea, and he seemed nice enough I didn't want to scare him away.

"Yes. Despite being 6th Dan, and totally serious about karate, Dad is totally cool. Mostly I go out with a group of friends, guys and girls, but I've gone on some one-on-one dates, too. But I was only asking you to spar at our dojo!"

"By the University, right?"

"Yes. On Hyde Park Avenue. You can get there by L, Bus, South Shore, or we have a parking lot behind the dojo if you drive."

"I do, but I don't have a car of my own."

"Let me give you my phone number and you can call to let me know when you want to come to our dojo. It could be pretty much any day, either after school or in the evening on weekdays, or on Saturday."

I went over to the table where the kids who kept the scores and standings were sitting, borrowed a pen and they wrote my name and number on a piece of scrap paper and gave it to Kevin. Once I'd done that, we went to watch the other semi-final match, which was between two boys, a brown belt, and a black belt. After about a minute of the first round, I was positive which one would eventually win, and I was right, though it took all three rounds.

The boy who won was from Sensei Molly's dojo, and I had met him a few times, but felt he was a jerk who didn't honor karate the way Dad taught. In fact, he was more like a member of Cobra Kai than Miyagi-Do. Our dojo was somewhere in between, though Dad's students were very much Miyagi-Do. The guy was very aggressive and barely defended, which I felt was to my advantage, especially given he was only about two inches taller than me.

"Bust him up!" Ashley smirked.

"You're way cuter than Doctor Pulaski!" I declared. "And unlike Data, I'm going to *win* by taking the shortest route to victory!"

"Kick him in the nuts?" Ashley asked with a silly smile.

"Against the rules, sadly. He's a dick, though, so anywhere I kick him is like that!"

"I can't believe Sensei Molly lets him be that way," Ashley said. "Sensei Will would never allow it, and Dad would kick him out of the dojo!"

"Well, Mr. 'Cobra Kai' is going down!"

We were called for the finals, and basically everyone in the gym came to watch. I took my place and stared Alex directly in the eyes, not averting my gaze or blinking. He blinked first and looked away, and I knew at that point I had him. Reminding myself not to be overconfident, I stepped forward when my name was called, we bowed, and I waited for the referee to call 'Begin!'.

As soon as his hand moved, I performed a triple combination of two punches and a kick before Alex was even ready. I'd anticipated the command perfectly, and caught Alex completely by surprise, scoring two points on the combination. He made a frantic attempt at a double combo, but he wasn't truly set, and his strikes were weak, making them easy to block and my counterpunch scored the third point to win the round less than twenty seconds after we'd started.

"Bitch!" he mouthed.

I hoped nobody in charge had seen that, because I wanted to win by kicking his ass, not by him being disqualified. He got away with it, and when the second round started, he was ready, so I bided my time and let him flail. He managed only one point on six strikes, and on his sixth strike, I counterpunched and caught him square in the solar plexus. It was clear he was winded, and I didn't want the match halted for an injury check, so I quickly followed up with three strikes, landing the second two, and winning the match.

He was shocked, but it was his own dumb fault for not taking me seriously. He'd fought better and harder against the boy in the semi-finals, and I was sure he had thought he could take me easily because I was a girl; he was wrong. My hand was raised by the referee, and based on my near-perfect score for my kata, I knew I was under-eighteen champion.

 Steve

"He's undisciplined and violent," I said to Molly after Birgit had thrashed her student.

"I know," Molly admitted. "I've tried everything to convince him that he's taken the wrong approach."

"I hope against hope you aren't going to convene a black belt board for him."

"No, but when I refuse, he'll leave for the independent dojo in Milwaukee."

"No loss. Did you see what he mouthed to Birgit?"

"No. What?"

"He mouthed 'bitch' after the first round. I let it go because my daughter would take ME out if I'd ended the match for an etiquette violation. You should

suspend him. Then let him go whine to Craig in Milwaukee and call YOU that name. They deserve each other."

"You really should challenge Craig to a sparring match," Molly suggested.

"I won't bring dishonor to my dojo or dishonor my Dan doing that. I need to congratulate my daughter!"

I walked over to where Birgit was standing with her sisters, Kara, and the other members of our dojo."

"Very good, Pumpkin!" I said, holding out my arms.

I gave her a quick hug and kissed her forehead.

"He fought dumb, Dad!" Stephie declared. "I could have beat him and I don't even have a brown belt!"

"He didn't respect me because I'm a girl," Birgit said. "He called me a bitch."

"He's not wrong," Ashley smirked.

"Careful, Cinderella," I warned.

"Tell me I'm wrong, Dad!" Ashley giggled. "I dare you!"

"Don't you dare, Dad!" Birgit ordered, hands on her hips, giving me her patented death stare.

"You are both entitled to your opinions," I replied with a grin.

"Coward!" Jacquelyn teased.

"Discretion is the better part of valor," I replied. "And I know better than to come between those two! But now let's watch the semi-finals and finals for the adults. Jacquelyn, it's all on your shoulders!"

Jolene had lost her quarter-final match, two rounds to one, and the final round 3-2.

"Somebody has to uphold the tradition of three straight!" Miyu declared.

"No pressure at all, right?" Jacquelyn asked with a smile.

"You can do it," Miyu counseled. "Remember what we discussed."

Jacquelyn did indeed win her semi-final match, and although it was close, lost the finals to a 4th Dan. Given Jacquelyn was only 2nd Dan, that wasn't unexpected. But, despite that loss, our dojo's focus on kata gave her the overall championship by a single point. Our dojo took home two of the three trophies, with the college/young-adult trophy going to one of Sensei Ichirou's students.

 Jesse

"You're still planning to come to Rochester for hockey camp next Summer, right?" Scarlett asked, as we sat in the sauna together.

"Yes. I'll be goalie coach for the grade school kids, then I'll be at my camp. I don't remember if I told you, but Birgit and I are going to Japan in August next year."

"No, you didn't! What's up with that?"

"Birgit is visiting Yuriko and I'm visiting a friend in Hiroshima."

"Let me guess -- a girl."

"Yes. Her name is Akiko, and she was here as an exchange student. She invited me to visit."

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but how many girls have you been with?"

"Admitting nothing about Akiko, my answer is 'more than one'."

"More than ten?" Scarlett asked.

"More than one," I replied.

"Obviously, given you weren't a virgin when we went to bed together. Are you ashamed of the number?"

"No. It's not something I think anyone should talk about. Would you want me telling people we've slept together?"

"I'm sleeping in your bed with you, so I think it's pretty obvious to everyone here!"

"OK, but that doesn't remove my obligation to respect you and not talk about it with anyone else. One of the biggest problems in society is too many people are too worried about what everyone else is doing. One of the keys to being happy is to NOT do that."

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody, really. I figured it out by watching how other people live and comparing it to how we live, and everyone in my family is much happier and content than the average person. I admit part of it is being upper-middle class,

but I know plenty of families around here who are fundamentally unhappy despite having good incomes. And mostly it appears it's because they're too worried about what other people do and what other people think.

"I'm absolutely sure you know what society would say about my dad's situation, but they say that about my moms, too, even though they're monogamous and committed for life. They'd have a fit about my brother having a fiancée who is eighteen when he's fourteen, and a fit about my dad, my moms, and my aunts allowing us to have overnight guests in our beds. I'm sure they'd have a fit about Birgit and me flying to Japan without an 'adult', despite the fact that we're better able to take care of ourselves than most adults we know!"

"Do you seriously believe that?" Scarlett challenged.

"Don't you?" I countered. "I mean, about Birgit and me? And even though you don't know them very well, Albert and Matthew? Albert flies to England every Summer by himself. Heck, he could fly the plane because he's spent so much time in his simulator! It's only society that prevents us from achieving our potential. We're forced to wait until we're eighteen or twenty-one or even twenty-five to do things; thirty for the US Senate and thirty-five for President."

Scarlett laughed, "I don't think the position of 'Empress of the Universe' has an age requirement in your sister's mind!"

"Which doesn't matter, because it only *exists* in her mind!"

"Your professors are going to either love you or hate you!"

"So, exactly like my teachers at Kenwood Academy!" I declared.

 Steve

"Did you know Commander Shaughnessy was going to let Nicholas fly her plane?" Bethany asked late on Saturday evening, looking very unhappy.

"Did I know? I did not. Did I think it might happen? Yes."

"You should have asked!"

"And you know that I don't interfere with Albert's relationship with Aimee. Whatever happened was between the boys and Aimee."

"I know I'm talking to a brick wall here, but a thirteen-year-old boy taking overnight trips with a thirty-six-year-old woman is not normal!"

"And I'm talking to a brick wall when I say I don't give a fuck about 'normal' or what society thinks. Not to mention he's been doing that for four years. Do you *really* think Aimee is going to violate her vows AND the UCMJ and risk literally everything?"

"It wouldn't be the first time someone did something like that. You know that personally."

"Jennie wasn't in the military, and wasn't married, and didn't have a child. Come off it!"

"I'm just saying what people might think."

"You mean what YOU might think. Will you stop throwing mud at the wall in the hopes that something will stick? You need to accept that my child-rearing methods actually *work*, while society is going to Hell in a handbasket! In order for children to grow and develop their potential, they *have* to be allowed to fail. That's when the real learning opportunities occur, and that prepares for adult life when *everyone* fails at something at some time or another.

"The notion that we have to do everything we can to protect children from even the most miniscule harm -- emotional, mental, physical or spiritual -- is a recipe for disaster that is playing out before our eyes. Set aside my usual libertarian rant and consider only the damage that does to children who are so protected and so sheltered and who have no privacy. It's a nightmare, Bethany."

"You do realize that basically the entire country, right and left, disagrees with you."

"One sec," I said. "I want to read something to you."

I pulled up a file on my computer.

It has never mattered to me that thirty million people might think I'm wrong. The number of people who thought Hitler was right did not make him right. The same principle should be applied to anyone who has an individualistic attitude. Why do you necessarily have to be wrong just because a few million people think you are?

"You wrote that?"

"No. Frank Zappa did. He also said something I have memorized -- 'If you end up with a boring, miserable life because you listened to your mom, your dad, your teacher, your priest, or some guy on television telling you how to do your shit, then you deserve it'."

"I'm not sure we can ever come to an agreement because you won't admit just how dangerous your ideas are."

"Oh, bullshit, Bethany! I *know* they're dangerous. I embrace them *because* they're dangerous. You cannot EVER guarantee safety, EVER! Jackie Williams wasn't safe in her own home! Jorge wasn't safe in the passenger seat of a car driven by

one the country's top trauma surgeons! And I don't need to tell you about your OWN encounter with what should have been the safest fucking place on the planet! So, tell me again how you plan to keep Nicholas 'safe'?"

"You're still every bit as much of an asshole as you ever were."

"And coming from you, I'm going to wear that as a badge of honor. Look, I never promised to fight -- and I'm using this word advisedly -- 'fair'. We discussed this when we reconciled, and now I'm wondering if we actually *did* reconcile, because you're back on the same hobby horse. But I think I know the source of your problem."

"This I have to hear," Bethany declared, with combined sarcasm and skepticism.

"Every time in the past that we fought, we fucked, THEN made up. We can't do that now, and that's the source of the problem. For *you*, not for me."

"YOU ASSHOLE!" Bethany growled.

"Which tells me you know it's true, and it also explains literally everything that's been going on for the past six years. We had a fight and didn't make up the way we always did."

"You think I'd actually fuck you at this point?"

"I do, Sweetheart. And, here's the other shoe -- that would wreck your life the way it ended up wrecking it every time except that very first time. If ever there were *star-cross'd lovers*, that was us, and you yourself admitted that in April 1985! Tom would never agree, and even if he did, I'd say 'no' because it makes a complete fucking mess every time.

"We should have stopped after that first time and been best friends forever, as we had discussed. If we'd done that, things would have been far different, though now I'm breaking my own rule about changing the past and expecting it would have been better. Not to mention missing out on an unbelievable threesome with two hot Milford cheerleaders!"

"Pig!" Bethany declared.

"I probably shouldn't have said that because it interferes with the conversation. Think about what I said."

Bethany sighed, "Fran agrees with you that we shouldn't have had sex."

"No, Fran Mercer thinks we should *never* have had sex. I'm positive that first time was absolutely necessary for you to finally move beyond the rape and stop allowing it to control you because after we screwed you could see yourself as something other than dirty or ruined. It didn't have to be me, but I was, if it had been limited to that one time, the safest possible option. It was the second encounter where things went off the rails."

"Have you spoken to her recently?"

"Not for about two years, and I have no interest in speaking to her. She threatened civil commitment if I disagreed with my doctors on my treatment in any way. I will give her exactly zero space in my life to make ANY claims about my health or behavior, and would consider her speaking to any of my children to be abusive. I'll report her if she does."

"Jesus!" Bethany gasped. "I didn't realize it was that bad."

"You were on my shit list, too, Bethany. It's difficult to get there, and even more difficult to stay there. Fran Mercer has managed to do both, along with my mom

and a pair of fundamentalist evangelical pastors. In her mind, ANY deviation from what she thinks is correct is a sign of mental illness. It's the same trap you willingly walked into with regard to teen sex. Unfortunately, I'm probably at least partly responsible for that."

"Far be it from me to argue with you, but why are you responsible?"

"My duty to you was to keep my word, and that meant I should have refused you. I was, at age fifteen, strong enough to help you but too weak to protect you. I allowed desire to override wisdom, not for the first time and not for the last time. But I don't want to debate that with you *again*. The question I have for you is whether or not you can admit that you want to fuck, acknowledge that we can't, and find a way forward."

"That's a heck of a trail from telling me to relax about Nicholas flying."

"Maybe so, but first of all, it all follows logically; second, your son is going to medical school and will enter the Military Match. There is not a damned thing you can do to stop it. If you try, you'll fail and you'll end up in the same situation with him as my mom is in with me. Will you answer my question?"

"You're awfully sure of yourself."

"And you're stalling."

"Damn you!" Bethany growled.

"Normally I'd say that was an admission, but you have to say it. Until you do, we can't get past it."

"Now you're applying psychology to ME?"

"You've done it often enough to me that a bit of payback is in order. Stop stalling. Either admit or deny."

"Fine. You're right."

"About?"

"God damn it! YES! I WANT TO FUCK! There. I said it!"

"And now we can move forward."

 Albert

"My mom is pissed," Nicholas said. "She's talking to your dad."

"She's not *really* pissed," I replied. "Moms do and say stuff because they worry about us. I told you my mom was freaked out when Commander Aimee let me take off and land for the first time. She got on my dad's case, but calmed down and you heard her at Thanksgiving dinner."

"My mom doesn't want me to join the Navy."

I rolled my eyes, "First of all, it's after medical school, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know from Mom, Aunt Sofia, and María Cristina that you'll be either twenty-five or twenty-six when you Match, so it's not as if your mom can do anything! What's she going to do? Call the Secretary of the Navy and tell him you're not allowed to serve your Residency in the Navy? As if that will do any good! You know I want to go to the Academy and fly jets off carriers, and I know

my mom isn't thrilled, but she's not going to try to stop me. She never really tried to stop me from flying."

"My mom's a bit nuts about it because of what happened to my dad."

"I get it, but would she stop you from flying on a commercial aircraft because some ignorant assholes hijacked four planes and crashed them? My grandpa still flies even though his wife died on 9/11. I get your mom wants you to be safe, but the world doesn't work that way. I'm not saying we should take dumb chances or pull dumb stunts, just that even going about your business each day can be dangerous. Do you think the kids or parents at Columbine three years ago thought, 'hey, today some assholes are going to shoot up the school, so I should stay home'?"

"No, because they had no way to know."

"Exactly. You have no way to know that you won't get hit on the ice and paralyzed like the kid Jesse told me about from Fenwick. It was a totally innocent collision, with no penalties, and he's paralyzed."

"Oh, I know. It's just..."

"She's a mom," I said. "So, love her, don't fight with her, and go about your life."

"That's good advice," Nicholas said.

 Steve

"Did you talk Bethany off the ledge?" Kara asked when I joined my wives in the Indian room before bed.

"More or less," I replied. "We had a fairly heated discussion because I identified our core problem."

"Sex?" Jessica asked.

"Basically," I admitted. "That first time, helping her see herself as a sexual being and not a victim was vital. Every time after that was simply sowing landmines in our own path. I will say this, advisedly, that we'd have saved a whole lot of heartache between us if we'd done what she'd initially asked me to do."

"An alternate future?" Suzanne asked. "I thought you didn't do that!"

"More like an acknowledgement of a mistake. That would have changed things significantly in both our lives, to the point where the world might be unrecognizable. That was one of the pivotal points where a different choice might well have led to a wildly different outcome. And because I wouldn't trade you three and the kids for anything, I have zero regrets about how my life turned out. Everything that happened, including the deaths of people close to me, shaped me into who I am and led me to the point where I'm lounging on floor pillows with three gorgeous women I love and who love me."

"Did you record Birgit's competition?" Jessica asked.

"Marcia was recording for Will, and she promised to make copies for Birgit."

"OK. Are we still planning to leave for Ohio on Friday morning?" Kara asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I figure we'll leave once the kids are off to school."

"Can't have Birgit miss her cuddle time!" Suzanne declared.

"Dad is covering my class on Friday," Jessica said.

"Do I need to pay off the favor to Allyson?" I asked with a smirk.

Jessica laughed, "It would be worth making an exception just to hear her reaction!"

"I suppose I could be talked into it," I said distractedly.

"Pretty blonde doctor?" Jessica asked. "That would take about two seconds!"

"It hasn't only taken two seconds since I was fourteen and had my first blowjob!" I chuckled.

"I meant your decision!"

"Obviously!"

"Do you still think it's a bad idea, Snuggle Bear?" Kara asked.

"We put the rules in place for a reason," I said. "Jennifer has made the point several times that every rule has an exception. The question we would have to ask is whether or not THIS is the exception."

"Isn't the first question if you want to?" Suzanne asked.

"That is the first question," I replied.

"He's being difficult again!" Jessica declared.

"Again?" Suzanne asked. "More like 'still'!"

"Is something wrong, Snuggle Bear?" Kara asked.

"No. Well, maybe. I think the conversation with Bethany might be affecting me."

"It's your usual introspection when you discover you've made a mistake and vocalize it," Suzanne observed.

"You're right, I'm sure, Suzanne," Kara said. "Did you write in your journal, Steve?"

"Not yet, but I will."

"And THEN you can give Allyson a night to remember!" Kara exclaimed.

"We'll see," I said. "How about the four of US have a night to remember?"

"YES!" all three wives exclaimed happily.



December 1, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"What are you doing during Spring Break?" Scarlett asked as we walked towards the terminal at Midway Airport on Sunday afternoon.

"I haven't made any plans."

"Could we see each other?"

"Probably, but let's talk about it when you visit after Christmas. Sometimes our extended family does something together."

"I plan to fly down on the 27th, if that's OK. You said the 26th was crazy."

"Beyond crazy! My six grandparents, plus three other sets of grandparents, plus Eduardo's parents, and likely Joel's parents, because my Aunt Stephanie and her family join us on Boxing Day as well. It'll be a complete madhouse!"

"They all come for just one day?"

"No, but that's the day when we all agree to be together."

"And they're all cool with your dad's setup?"

"Not by a longshot! My dad's mom, well, I told you about her. And Mom Two's parents are uncomfortable with her marrying Mom One, but they treat me like a grandkid and don't act like jerks like my dad's mom. Also, I'm not a hundred percent sure if Jessica's mom will be here, but Doctor Al will, of course. And Chelsea's parents are invited, but I know Matt and Chelsea are going to Ohio during break, so I'm not sure about them. Grandpa A and Doctor Al are the coolest, but Grandpa and Grandpa One are pretty cool, too."

"I don't think my parents could deal with it! They can't deal with me being almost twenty and having my own life!"

"What did you tell them about this week?"

"That I was visiting a friend in Chicago. They'd be very unhappy if they knew I was staying in your room."

"They didn't ask any questions?"

"I kind of finessed it. They aren't cool like your friends Doctor Mary and Don."

"I bet they suspect, but are taking the 'willful ignorance' route. Parents aren't as clueless as they seem. If they ask you, you should be honest with them."

"My dad would lose his mind! He expects me to be a virgin on my wedding night!"

"As if that's ANY of his business! But, as I said, I'd wager they 'know', even if they pretend not to."

We entered the terminal and saw long lines at the check-in desks, which didn't surprise me.

"You can't come to the gate," she said. "And as much as I want you to stay, it's silly for you to stand here and wait."

"I'll see you in twenty-six days," I said. "How long did you plan to stay?"

"I should say 'forever', but I promised my grandma I'd be at her house on New Year's Day, so I'll have to leave New Year's Eve morning."

"OK!"

We hugged, exchanged a quick kiss, she got into the long line to get her boarding pass. I turned, left the terminal, and headed for my car.

 Birgit

I was sitting at my desk in my room when my IM pinged. I saw it was Kjell, so took a second to reset my brain to 'Swedish mode'. Dad said once I was speaking it full time, I wouldn't have to consciously think about switching, and it would just happen.

KjellK88: Hej!

DadsPumpkin: Hej! What's up?

KjellK88: Dad made reservations for me to fly to Chicago on the 27th and fly home on January 4th. Is that OK?

DadsPumpkin: Yes!!!! I have a nice, warm...bed waiting for you!

KjellK88: Bed? 😊

DadsPumpkin: There might be something else if you're interested!

KjellK88: What do you think?!

DadsPumpkin: I think you should buy your tickets! I'll let Dad know.

KjellK88: I think Mom is going to call him soon to check.

DadsPumpkin: As if he'd say 'no' to her about anything!

KjellK88: Will you say 'no' to anything?

DadsPumpkin: If I answer 'no' that's contradictory! I'll say 'yes' to anything! Will you?

KjellK88: Why do I think I should be afraid?

DadsPumpkin: Because you should! 😊

KjellK88: I need to go meet Per and Henrik! See you in four weeks!

DadsPumpkin: I can't wait!

KjellK88: Later.

DadsPumpkin: Later!

I was happy he was coming to visit, but I wasn't sure I could survive for another month without sex, and my 'personal massager' just wasn't the same. It had been ten days since I had sent Philip the card, and I hadn't heard from him. I knew that could partly be because of Thanksgiving, but I suspected he wouldn't respond.

I wondered if I should call Tomás, from Jesse's hockey team, or wait for him to call me. I decided it was probably better to wait for him to call, so I pulled out my phone and called Tiffany to see if she wanted to hang out.

 Steve

"Hi!" Karin exclaimed when I answered the phone on Sunday afternoon.

"«Hejsan»!" I replied, and we continued in Swedish.

"I'm calling to see if it's OK if Kjell visits Birgit during Winter Break."

"It's a really cool mom who arranges her son's assignments!" I teased.

"I don't believe my son or your daughter need our help in that matter!"

"So true!" I agreed. "When?"

"December 27th, with a return flight on January 4th. Is that OK?"

"Of course! He's welcome here any time, as are you and Kristian."

"We'll plan to come sometime in July or August, depending on when Kristian has his leave."

"Just let us know!"

We said 'goodbye', I hung up, and made a note on my calendar about Kjell's visit, as well as one on my 2003 calendar about a possible visit by his entire family.

"Dad?" Birgit said, coming into my study.

"Kjell?"

"Karin called you?"

"I literally just hung up. It's OK, obviously."

"Thanks, Dad! I'm going to Tiffany's to hang out. See you for dinner!"

She came over to get a hug, then left my study. I got up and went to let Kara know about Kjell's visit, then returned to my study to write in my journal.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Are you OK with getting together with Larisa's friends over Christmas break?" Chelsea asked after we arrived at my mom's house late on Sunday evening.

"They were a lot of fun, especially Abi."

"She doesn't have a boyfriend..."

"And I have you! Seriously, I don't want anyone but you. Please don't take this the wrong way, but why do you doubt me?"

Chelsea sighed, "I don't. I doubt *me*. Not because I want to be with anyone else, but because I wonder if I'm good enough for you."

"What the heck?!" I exclaimed. "Sorry, that came out wrong. But seriously, you are *perfect* for me. I've never wanted anyone else, and I never will want anyone else. I'm not my dad. I'm more like Eduardo in that way. Mom is the only woman he's ever loved. Sure, he had girlfriends before, but once he met Mom, that was it. They were apart for a bit because he was living in Spain, but once he moved here, they became permanent.

"And all of my brothers and sisters want traditional marriages. Nobody is going to do what my dad did. That's even true of Birgit, who will eventually settle

down and marry, according to her own thinking. And you know Stephie will be with Nicholas once he's actually interested in girls the way she needs him to be. Albert and Jane are married..."

"You don't seriously believe that, do you?" Chelsea interrupted.

"His words, not mine. He chats with her online and sees her every Summer. He can't marry for real until after the Academy, because they don't let you in if you're married. But I can see it happening as soon as he graduates. But back to us. You need to stop thinking you aren't good enough for me. You are. You're perfect in every way!"

"You really believe that?"

"I do."

"Show me?"

I smiled, took her hand, and led her upstairs to my bedroom.

LVII. A Blast From the Past

December 2, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

On Monday morning, the NIKA executive team met with Jackie Phelan, Jeremiah Brown, our architects, and Gerald Brown, from Brown Construction, to discuss razing the Annex and constructing our new building, as well as plans for remodeling the original building once everyone had moved to the new space. Gerald Brown's firm would be doing some of the work, but his main role was as general contractor, supervising firms that specialized in constructing multi-story office buildings, as well as ones who handled razing buildings, something Brown Construction didn't do.

"As I noted," Eve said, "we'll have everyone in our leased space no later than December 30th. Demolition can begin anytime after that."

"Weather permitting, demolition will begin on January 2nd," Gerald Brown said. "If there's a Snow Emergency, which is defined as two inches of snow, we wouldn't be able to park equipment on the street. I've built in five snow days into the demolition schedule, so that shouldn't be a problem. We won't have that problem during construction, as except cement trucks, we can avoid using the street."

"Executives who park between this building and the Annex will need to make alternative plans for parking until at least the end of April," Eve announced. "See me for options; NIKA will cover the costs."

"Is there any possibility that the city will screw us?" I asked.

Jackie, Jeremiah, and Gerald all laughed.

"This is Chicago, so you can count on it!" Gerald declared. "But with the Alderman on board, we should be able to clear any concerns quickly. To avoid any hassles, my bid included one hundred percent union labor, and that's a requirement for all the subs as well. We also have the advantage that my firm is certified minority-owned, and Jackie and Jeremiah are certified as minority- and woman-owned. And before Steve gets his libertarian hackles up, those designations don't mean anything for private contracts, but they do keep the jackals at bay, including your Alderman."

"Whatever," I said lightly, rolling my eyes in my best Birgit impression.

Elyse and my sister both laughed.

"Steve's become mellow in his old age," Stephanie said. "And he knows that WE are certified women-owned-and-operated because SKJ partners has two female partners, and owns the majority of the shares, not to mention what the all-female executive team holds."

"Again, whatever!" I chuckled. "Steve is simply accepting the reality of doing business in this city and state. But he chooses to live and work here, so..."

"Also, in a move that had Steve's libertarian hackles up," Eve said, "we applied for a TIF subsidy, and that was granted this morning. That will defray about ten percent of the overall project cost. It would have been foolish to leave that money on the table."

"It was Stephanie's call," I said. "I provided an opinion."

"Which, believe it or not," Stephanie said, "boiled down to 'take the money and run!'"

Everyone laughed.

"He *is* getting mellow in his old age!" Jeremiah said with a grin.

"Says the guy who's only a few years younger than I am!" I retorted.

"Steve," Jackie said, "Gerald and I spoke with Siobhán, and we have a plan for moving the cherry blossom mural."

"Thank you."

"The biggest challenge is the «tatami» mats," Gerald interjected. "As you know, they have to be ordered from Japan. I have Nellie working on sourcing them. We're confident we can have them in time, but you never know. That was called out in the bid."

I nodded, "I understand. And Eve assured me you can work around my office when remodeling this space."

"Yes."

The original building would be remodeled into conference rooms and an auditorium, and would be the main place we greeted and entertained clients and other visitors and held 'all staff' meetings. The new building would be maximized for working space, with each group having defined their ideal work environment. Penny and I would be on the 5th floor with the executives, while the rest of the development team would be on the 4th floor.

"I was surprised you nixed the idea of a sauna in your office," Jackie observed.

"It was tempting," I replied, "but it's a luxury we don't really need. Work isn't nearly as stressful as it was ten years ago when I first considered the idea for our current space."

"I don't think we have anything else for Steve, unless he wants to get into the nuts and bolts of construction and move schedules."

"He does not!" I declared firmly. "Thanks everyone."

I left the conference room and returned to the office I shared with Penny.

"Any surprises?" she asked.

"No. I just don't like having to move the development and support teams to leased space for six months. That'll be a pain for everyone, especially us, because we'll have to walk to the other space for team meetings every week."

"Forget that! It's the snacks that are the REAL problem! Not to mention the pool table, ping-pong table, foosball tables, and the big screen TV!"

"Poor baby. You could ask Eve for an office at 550 West Jackson if you wanted."

"And move out of here? No way! Bob would never let me move back!"

"He did suggest to Stephanie that it was an opportunity to have you move to a regular development office. I vetoed it."

"I can't believe he still has a problem with it after six years of working here! I've shared an office with you since day one!"

"And you know, Bob's job is to keep an eye out for anything that might cause human resources problems. I find much of what he says to be complete nonsense, but the government...never mind. I'm going to rant, and you've heard it all before!"

Penny laughed, "So true!"

"And we have work to do. We need to finish these modules and get them through the QA process by the December 15th code freeze."

"That's a Sunday."

"Yes, and you know developers set their own weekly schedules, and some choose to work Saturdays. The QA team will lock out changes at noon on Sunday and begin release testing on the following Monday."

"Remember when we just saved our code in a folder and ran the compiler to build the project?"

"With four or five developers, we could get away with it. That would be a nightmare of epic proportions now!"

"Are we switching to *Subversion* for source code control?"

"As with every pre-release open-source project, the question is whether some significant change will occur before the formal release. We've looked at it, and it seems stable enough, but we're going to wait. We also looked at *arch*, but to me it seems overly complicated. Brenda and I agreed we'd stick with *CVS* through at least the next development cycle. We'll look again late next year."

The phone buzzed.

"Steve," Kimmy said, "I have Dante for you."

"Put him through, please."

She did, and Dante and I exchanged greetings.

"If it were your money, would you put it into GlucoTech?" he asked.

"In a heartbeat! I discussed it in a roundabout way with Jessica and got very positive vibes. And no, she won't say a word to anyone. She's as mercenary as you are!"

Dante laughed, "I won't rehash the old argument, but you're still a bleeding heart when it comes to your staff! OK. I'm going to have my attorneys draw up a funding offer and present it to them. If they agree, I'll want you to visit quarterly to confirm what they report. Same fee structure, of course."

"OK. I take it you're going to pass on the others?"

"I'm taking a hard look at CSN Stores in Boston, but the others are going nowhere in the long run. I think CSN may be onto something with a digital marketplace, similar to Amazon with books. The real risk is that Sears gets serious about an online presence. If they turn their catalog business into an online business, they'll own it."

"They don't appear to be making any real effort," I said. "But that could change. I take it you own Amazon stock?"

"Of course, just as you do. What do you think of Amazon Web Services?"

"I think it's a smart move. They've built a great platform and making the APIs available allows third parties to build web applications on the Amazon platform."

It might be a way for someone to steal Sears' thunder, though not having Sears customer list and history of mail order is a big challenge. When do you plan to present your proposal?"

"By the end of the week. I don't want someone sniping me! I'll want you to make another trip when we close the deal, then quarterly, as I mentioned before."

"Will do! Enjoy your holidays."

"You, too! I'll be in touch."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"Anything you can share at this point?" Penny asked.

"No specifics, but I'll be going to Arizona every quarter to get a status update."

"What company?"

"As much as I love you, Pretty Penny, I can't say until after Dante closes the deal. I signed an NDA."

"You could prove how much you love me!" she said invitingly.

"I do, every day, by sharing my office with you!"

"You are just no fun! No fun at all!"

I leaned over and kissed her cheek, she smiled, and we both got to work. A few minutes later, *adium* chimed, and I pressed Command-Tab on my Mac to activate it.

SongOfSolomon7: Little Red Riding Hood is no longer welcome at grandma's house. Or her parents' house. Or her former church!

NIKASteve: Are you OK?

SongOfSolomon7: Absolutely! Everything is set with Tabitha and John, and my dorm and tuition are paid to the end of the semester.

NIKASteve: Did they formally kick you out?

SongOfSolomon7: I received a letter of disfellowship yesterday for grave, unrepentant sin.

NIKASteve: I take it you were as explicit as you intended?

SongOfSolomon7: Yes! "Dad, Robert, Pastor Dwight, I watched a man fuck his wife, and right after that, I sucked his dick without him washing while he licked my pussy. I begged him to fuck me really, really hard, which he did, but had him cum in my mouth instead of my pussy. I swallowed his cum, then he put it in my butt before I had my first kiss! And all of that with his wife watching! Later, I let him cum in my pussy, on my face, in my butt, and in my mouth, and we fucked for two days straight! And I plan to do it again!"

NIKASteve: I'm surprised none of them had a stroke!

SongOfSolomon7: My mom ran screaming and crying from the room, my dad looked like he was going to have a heart attack, and Pastor Dwight looked at me like I was Satan incarnate!

NIKASteve: But no actual health problems for them?

SongOfSolomon7: No. I was told to get out, so I left and went back to Trinity. Are we still on for 4:00pm on the 14th?

NIKASteve: We are.

SongOfSolomon7: You should meet my friend Nadia!

NIKASteve: You want to be careful about who you tell.

SongOfSolomon7: I didn't name names, and she has no clue who you are. She's DarkDreams82 on AIM, and she'll know you if you identify as the Big Bad Wolf.

NIKASteve: I'll think about it.

SongOfSolomon7: If you do, she won't say a word to anyone, and won't change anything else in her life. But she has fantasies she wants to explore. You'd be perfect. And once it happens, she'll disappear.

NIKASteve: Interesting.

SongOfSolomon7: Just think about it. Later!

NIKASteve: I will. Later!

 Jesse

"Were you serious about what you suggested last time?" Missy asked when we went up to my bedroom after school on Monday.

"In suggesting it as something we could do? Yes. I'm pretty much open to anything."

"A guy?"

"Anything heterosexual!" I chuckled. "I'm actually not interested in a threesome that involved a guy, either."

"Concerned you might not 'measure up'?" Missy teased.

"I have ZERO interest in being around any erection other than my own! You know I'm cool with Tim and don't mind him joking around, but zero interest. Do you have any interest in being with a girl?"

"Gross! No way! Er, sorry."

"I didn't take it that you objected to my moms, just that you weren't interested. Would you have a threesome?"

"I bet YOU would!" Missy declared.

"Been there, done that," I said smugly.

"I don't think I could do it in front of someone else. That would be too much like porn."

"Believe it or not, I've never watched even a single frame of porn."

"I thought you guys had Cinemax," Missy said. "Birgit talks about it."

I laughed, "Birgit likes to tease about 'Skinemax', but it's not really porn. I've seen a few R-rated movies that were close to what Cinemax shows."

"Like?"

"*Eyes Wide Shut* is probably the best example. My dad doesn't restrict what we're allowed to watch."

"Have you seen *Basic Instinct*? You could see Sharon Stone's cooch! My mom about lost her mind because she didn't know that was in the movie when she and my dad watched it."

"Did you see it?"

"No. I heard them argue about it, and the videotape disappeared. Want to see mine?"

"Yes!"

"And that thing you wanted to do? We can try it."

She began undressing, and I quickly followed suit.

 Matthew

"What's bugging you?" I asked Maggie as I walked her home after Gary had dropped us at my house after drama practice.

"You know what's bugging me," she said quietly. "I can't stop thinking about being with you."

"And you know why we can't," I replied.

"Chelsea," Maggie said sullenly.

"Not to mention what you've maintained since I've known you -- that you have to be a virgin on your wedding night."

Maggie sighed deeply, "I know, but I can't stop thinking about it, and I want to. I really want to."

In an alternate reality where Chelsea and I weren't a couple, I'd want Maggie as my girlfriend, but I didn't live in an alternate reality. In *this* reality, Chelsea and I were committed, and nothing was going to change that. I couldn't imagine a future without Chelsea and the kids we'd have together, and I wasn't going to do *anything* that might jeopardize that future.

"And doing that would hurt you, me, and Chelsea," I replied. "No matter how much you might want it, it's not something you should do, and it's not something I'd even consider doing. That has zero to do with what I think about you, and everything to do with how much I love Chelsea."

"But you'd want to, right?"

"We've had this conversation," I said gently. "The problem with answering that is that it's not a consideration, and I'm afraid that an affirmation would only encourage those thoughts you're having."

Maggie didn't say anything else and when we reached her house, I felt it was a really bad idea to hug her, so I didn't. She turned and went into the house looking sad, but I didn't know what else I could do. I turned and quickly walked home, then went to my room to lie on my bed and think.

"Something bothering you, Matthew?" Mom asked when she came to the door about fifteen minutes later.

"Not anything I can't handle," I replied. "It's not me."

"Maggie?" Mom asked.

"You know?"

"Well, unless you broke up with Chelsea over the phone after she left for the city this morning, I can't imagine what would have you in an obvious mood."

"No chance of that!" I declared. "Though Maggie wishes there was."

"I've seen how she looks at you," Mom said. "I take it she said something?"

"For the second time," I replied. "It started right before she broke up with Mark. She said she got turned on kissing me on stage..."

"Shocking, given you are your dad's son!"

I laughed, "If there is anything that I could possibly be less interested in than details about how I came to be, I don't know what it is!"

"Sorry I interrupted."

"It's OK. Anyway, once she broke up with Mark, she made it clear she wants to go to bed with me, but then says she wouldn't hurt Chelsea that way. She pushed hard today, I mean for her, and made it clear she'd give up her promise to God to stay a virgin and implied strongly she wants me to break up with Chelsea."

"And you aren't interested in your dad's setup, even if both girls would accept it, which I can't imagine."

"That works for Dad," I replied. "But you know none of us kids want that. Sure, Jesse has girlfriends and Birgit has boyfriends, but both of them say they want the same thing I do -- to marry one person, have kids and grandkids, and stay together for life. Nobody wants Dad's arrangement."

"I assume you told Maggie 'no' firmly and unequivocally?"

"I made it clear that I love Chelsea, and that was never going to change. I even said that doing it would hurt all three of us, which is something I could never imagine doing. The problem is, I think Maggie is obsessing."

"I know I'm ancient," Mom said with a smile, "but as a teenager, I obsessed about sex, starting around age thirteen, and so did many of my friends. It's normal. The key is to not allow that obsession to overwhelm and control you. I had that happen, and it was a serious struggle to control it. Believe it or not, your dad helped."

"I don't believe it!" I declared.

"You know he and I were together at Aunt Jenny's wedding, but then we didn't fool around again for a long, long time. I think that's actually what ensured your appearance in the world!"

"Uhm, I may only be fourteen, but I'm pretty sure that *doing it* is what causes pregnancy, not abstaining!"

Mom laughed, "Obviously, but it's what helped us build a very good relationship that resulted in your dad and I having two wonderful boys together and me having an amazing career. If it had been just about sex, it probably wouldn't have lasted. Think about you and Chelsea, and how close you were and how deep your relationship was before you even kissed the first time. I mean, a real kiss."

"It makes perfect sense," I agreed. "I'm just concerned about Maggie because I have to see her every day, and we're in drama together. If she doesn't figure out how to get past it, it's going to cause serious problems."

"She has to work that out on her own," Mom said. "You just need to make sure you don't do anything to encourage her."

"I'm super careful, but drama presents a potential problem. We have three-and-a-half years where we're likely to have on-stage kisses. And that's where it all started."

"Your kisses are *that* good?" Mom asked with a smirk and an arched eyebrow.

"No comment," I said smugly, knowing Chelsea liked them, which was all that mattered.

"Diner in five minutes."

"Thanks, Mom."

 Jesse

"When can I see you again?" Missy asked as I walked her home just before 6:00pm.

"Wednesday," I replied. "Brooke and I do homework on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Could we go on an actual date?"

"How about a week from Saturday?"

"Sure! Remember, you have to meet my dad."

"I remember! What did you want to do?"

"Duh!" Missy giggled. "I'll even let you do what you did today. It was weird, but also cool."

"Good to know! But I meant dinner, a movie, or what?"

"If you can pick me up early enough to have dinner, see *Treasure Planet*, and have time to fool around, that would be my plan."

"What's your curfew?"

"11:00pm."

That would make things challenging, given my hockey game wouldn't end until around noon, and I was sure Zahra would want to spend the afternoon with me.

"That makes it difficult with the drive back and forth," I said. "I know there's a theatre in Oak Park, but coming back here to fool around would cost thirty minutes each way."

"Ugh!" Missy groused. "My dad will be home when you pick me up, and I'm not sure if he'll go out or have his girlfriend at the house."

"We could just go to dinner and the movie, and I could see you on Monday for playtime."

Missy laughed, "Nice euphemism! I suppose that will be OK, because if my dad caught us, I'd be dead meat!"

"I'll plan to pick you up around 5:30pm. OK?"

"Great! I'll make sure Dad knows."

At her house, we hugged, and she kissed my cheek, as she didn't want to give her mom any reason to suspect.

"See you Wednesday!" I said.

"See you Wednesday!" she agreed. "And if you behave, I'll give my first ever blowjob!"

I chuckled, hugged her again, and once she had gone into her house, I turned and walked home.

 Birgit

At karate practice on Monday evening, Sensei Will congratulated both Jacquelyn and me and placed the dojo trophies in the display case next to Miyu's and Sensei Jim's trophies. My personal trophy was displayed on the mantle over the fireplace at home, though at some point Dad said we'd get a display case.

When we left the dojo, I saw I had a voice mail on my mobile phone, so I pressed the button to retrieve it.

Hi Birgit! It's Tomás! I'm calling after Thanksgiving like you asked! Call me, please!

He left his number, but I used the call history feature because it was easier to do that than memorize and key in the numbers. He answered, and we agreed to meet on Friday afternoon after school, go to dinner with the gang, and hang out afterwards, maybe going to a movie.

"Hot date?" Ashley asked with a smirk when I closed the phone. "Who?"

"Tomás, from Jesse's hockey team."

"So now you're a hockey groupie?" Ashley teased.

"Cinderella..." Dad said.

"Oh, please!" Ashley exclaimed, rolling her eyes. "If I can't give Birgit a hard time, who *could* I give a hard time!"

Dad, my moms, and Suzanne all laughed.

"She's just jealous!" I declared.

"Not even!" Ashley exclaimed. "By the time I worry about boys that way, you'll probably be in college!"

"She has a point," Dad said. "In less than four years, she'll be fifteen and you'll be a Freshman in college!"

"You just made ME feel old, Snuggle Bear!" Mom said. "I'm going to have a child in college in less than four years!"

"And I'll have one in college in less than *two* years!" Dad chuckled. "Jesse is already scoping out UW Madison. Not to mention in about twenty months, I'll have SEVEN teenagers!"

"And you love all of us, Dad!" I declared.

"I do. Very much."



December 4, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve," Lucas said over the intercom on Wednesday afternoon, "I have a uniformed Naval officer here who says he knows you. His name is Cleveland Robinson."

"Wow! There's a blast from the past. I'll send Kimmy down to bring him up."

I disconnected the call and asked Kimmy to bring in my guest.

"Who?" Penny asked.

"Cleveland Robinson. He was Navy ROTC, and I'm positive you met him back in the day; must have been 1986."

"The big black guy who smoked cigars and who Sofia asked if he'd fit in the submarine, right?"

"One in the same!"

Kimmy brought in the tall black man with graying hair and captain's stripes on the sleeves of his dress blues, and his hat with scrambled eggs on the brim under his arm.

"Captain Robinson, I presume?" I said with a grin.

I extended my hand, and he shook it, gripping tightly.

"Do you remember Penny O'Neill?" I inquired. "She'd have been sixteen or so when we last met."

"Ma'am," he said. "You're prettier than you were at sixteen."

"I like him!" Penny exclaimed, hopping up to shake his hand.

"What brings you to town?" I asked.

"A funeral, unfortunately. I called Karl Schumacher, and he gave me your contact information. I figured I'd just stop by."

"I'm glad you did! Where are you assigned?"

"I'm Deputy Commander, Fleet Activities Sasebo. I had the *Fort McHenry* for two years, and I'm up for my flag."

"That's great! What class is that ship?"

"Landing Ship Dock. I assume you still spend enough time with Navy men to know what that is."

"I do. My youngest son is hoping to go to the Academy."

"Karl said you had a pile of kids and your situation is even more interesting than it was!"

"Commander Aimee Shaughnessy, among others, refers to me as a walking, talking UCMJ violation, and they aren't wrong!"

"I ran into the Commander about ten years ago."

"Are you in town on Saturday, by any chance?"

"My MAC flight leaves O'Hare at 1300 on Saturday. Why?"

"You should attend Men's breakfast. There are nine active duty officers who join us, not including Karl and a couple of other retired men. I believe Clayton Johnson is in town this week."

"You know, I think I will."

"The only downside is that I'm going to be out of town this weekend. Let me buy you lunch."

"Unfortunately, I have somewhere I have to be in an hour. I could swing lunch on Friday."

"Equally unfortunately, we're leaving Friday morning. I know you're heading back to Japan, but the next time you're Stateside, call. I'll come to where you are."

"I'll do that."

"The men meet at Bucktown Bistro on North Avenue in Bucktown at 8:00am."

"I'll be there!"

I walked him to the lobby, we shook hands, and I went back to my office.

"How is he up for admiral and Aimee is still a commander?" Penny asked.

"Aimee is, in effect, being punished because she's a girl, and worse, for having the audacity to have a baby."

"That's just wrong!" Penny exclaimed. "If men had babies, they'd NEVER put up with that shit!"

"You're preaching to the choir, Pretty Penny. That's one reason I set specific salary levels and why we don't ask for salary information on our applications. And why we don't hold having a family against female employees."

"I still can't believe that dumb bitch from Northwestern tried to make us out to be misogynistic!"

"According to Clark Brody and others, that's been her *modus operandi* for decades. Her problem is she picked the most female-friendly firm in the city!"

"Not friendly enough!" Penny growled.

"Go back to work, Penelope."

"You are no fun, Steve! Just no fun!"

As usual, I gave her a kiss on the cheek, which caused her to smile, and we got back to work.

 Birgit

"Would you be interested in participating in a photo shoot?" Bob asked after photography club.

"Sure. What do you have in mind?"

"You, Meghan, and a girl we know named Cassie. Mariana would act as my photography assistant. I want to do outdoor action shots."

"Indoor action shots would be WAY more fun!" I teased.

Bob laughed, "And get me arrested! The government does not have a sense of humor in that regard."

"They need to get a grip. What did you have in mind?"

"Ice skating, walking in Washington Park, that kind of thing."

"I'm game. When?"

"Over Christmas break. Hopefully we'll get some snow."

"Hopefully."

We said 'goodbye' and I left to meet Fangsu so we could walk to my house to do our homework.

 Steve

"Dad, there's a pair of detectives at the door," Birgit announced.

"Did they say what they wanted?"

"No. They just asked for you. I told them I'd get you and shut the door. They're on the front porch."

"It's almost time to leave for karate. You, your sisters, your moms, and Suzanne should go if I'm not done."

"OK. I'll tell them."

I got up and went to the front door, and opened it.

"Detectives León and Madison," Detective Madison said. "Are you armed?"

A standard question because my FOID card and carry permits would be flagged if they ran me through their computer. I was wearing my gi, and it would have been tough to conceal a firearm, but I supposed it was possible.

"No. My handguns are in a locked cabinet in my study. How may I help you?"

"We have some questions about the murder next door. Could we come in?"

I considered the situation and decided I could invite them into the kitchen.

"Yes, but I only consent to you following me to the kitchen, and only to you being there."

"We've read your file," Detective León said. "I was afraid you'd make us stay on the porch."

"I did consider it; follow me, please."

I led them to the kitchen, offered them tea or coffee, which they declined.

"I see you're a black belt," Detective León said.

"6th Dan," I replied. "I was just about to go to the dojo with my family."

"I'm sorry, but we do need to ask a few questions about your relationship with the Williams."

"There isn't much to tell," I replied.

"Can you explain why we were told there was bad blood between you and Peter Williams?"

"That's news to me," I replied. "I certainly had no animosity toward him or his family, though I know they were unhappy with my family arrangement."

"In what way?"

"They're Pentecostal, and I have children by four women, three to whom I was never married. I live with three women, and have for most of the time I've lived here. In addition, the mother of my eldest son is in a committed relationship with another woman."

"So you're not married and you're living with three women?"

"I am married," I replied. "My wife is Jessica Adams, a renowned trauma surgeon at UofC Hospital."

"I think you just explained a very cryptic entry in the files for this address."

"I'm curious about what it says."

"Non-traditional relationships."

"That would be highly accurate. When the Williams moved in, they discovered that fact right away. We don't advertise, but it's not as if we could hide it from the neighbors, or would even try. Once they discovered that, they told their boys not to be friends with my boys, and not to come on our property. The way I saw it was that was their business and so long as they didn't bother me, I wasn't going to bother them."

"Do you know about their relationship with other neighbors?"

"Not really. We know people on the street, but other than the Penfields who live on the other side, we're not close to anyone. The one family to whom we were close was chased out of the country for the crime of being Saudi Muslims after 9/11."

"We have notes in the file about that. They moved?"

"Back to Saudi Arabia because they were being harassed."

"Not sure you can blame people," Detective Madison said. "My brother-in-law was a New York firefighter who didn't come out of the buildings."

"My condolences. My father-in-law's wife was on United Flight 11, but our friends weren't involved and were law-abiding residents."

"Is there anything else you can tell us about the Williams?"

"Not really. Other than knowing where he worked, that his kids are at Kenwood Academy and play football, and their choice of churches, no."

"Just for completeness, I assume you can account for your whereabouts during the day on Monday of last week."

"Verifiably, for the entire day. I was at work in the Loop, witnessed by at least a dozen people, In addition, computer logs and security badge logs will prove that. There are also cameras at all entrances and we keep the videos for eight days which will show me arriving at 7:30am and not leaving until 4:30pm. I don't have access to the logs or the recordings."

Detective León laughed, "You aren't a suspect, but we spoke to you, so we need to record your whereabouts in case the State's Attorney thought you might be a witness. I'd say that's a big 'no', but they'll decide. Your kids were all in school?"

"Yes, and the other adults who live in the house were at work or in class, and that's all provable."

"OK. What do you do for a living?"

"Software Engineer."

"Thanks. The evidence against Peter Williams is damning, and I'd say the case is airtight, but in murder cases, the State's Attorney wants no stone left unturned even if it's obvious what happened."

"Obvious does not mean correct," I replied. "Unfortunately, I don't have anything for you. I'd speak to people at the football game who heard the heated argument."

"We've spoken to several of them, with several more to go," Detective León said. "Thanks, Mr. Adams. I'm sorry we interfered with your karate training."

"I want murderers punished as much as the next man, and I have no sympathy for men who use violence against women, so I understand."

I walked them out, decided it was too late to go to karate, so I went upstairs and changed into sweats, then went downstairs to wait for the others to return.



December 5, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve, Brenda is here with your new Blackberry device," Kimmy announced over the intercom on Thursday afternoon.

"Send her in," I replied.

Brenda removed her street shoes and came into the office in stocking feet, rather than put on slippers, which was acceptable.

"I have your Blackberry 6710," she said. "It's activated, set up, and has a full charge. I have the sync cable, but it's serial and the software only works on Windows. Your email will be sync'd with our corporate Exchange server, and it obviously has phone and SMS capabilities."

"Coverage?"

"Good in major cities and along major interstates, spotty elsewhere. I'd say comparable to your mobile phone."

"Any specific tests you want me to perform?"

"I suspect the email client is probably the most important for you, given you already carry your own mobile phone. I wouldn't switch to this phone because of the challenge of porting numbers to or from it. Only a replacement device from the same carrier would allow you to keep the number."

"I thought that was mandated by the FCC," I replied.

"It is, since 1996, but it hasn't been fully implemented by mobile carriers. All the CLECs have implemented it for landlines, but it's a pain in the ass and they drag their feet and have any number of 'technical problems' that are designed to keep you from taking the risk of switching."

"All because Judge Green had no fucking clue about then-current telecommunications and no idea of what was possible."

"I haven't heard what you think he should have done."

"Broken out switching infrastructure from service provision. A national infrastructure company with mandates to maintain the network and allow anyone to sell services. They provide the infrastructure at fixed costs to all comers. Let a hundred flowers bloom!"

Brenda laughed, "You'd quote Chairman Mao before you'd quote George Bush! Either of them!"

"Truth!" I agreed. "Anything special I need to know about the phone?"

"No. I have a CD with the sync software, and you have admin privileges on your windows workstation, so I'm sure you prefer to install it yourself."

"I do," I said.

"Here's the number," she said, handing me a sheet of paper. "Enjoy!"

"Thanks. I'll let you know what I think, and I'll have a chance to check coverage because I'm heading to Ohio this weekend. How long do we have these?"

"At least until the end of March. That's when we have to either return them or buy them. That's also when we'll be able to buy more phones. These are testing models."

"Good work!"

"Thanks."

 Birgit

"This is Birgit!" I said, answering my phone from an 847 number that wasn't in my address book.

"Hi. This is Kevin Fogerty, from the karate tournament."

"Hi! Ready for your rematch?"

"I spoke with Sensei Sharon and I'll come to your dojo on Saturday, if that's OK."

"Perfect! Our regular morning class is at 10:00am, and my dad's class is at 2:00pm, but he's away this weekend so I'm leading."

"Didn't you just get your black belt?"

"Yes, but I've been at the dojo since I was six! And Miyu can't really lead because she's going to have her baby any day now."

"If I show up for the 10:00am class, would your Sensei allow us to spar?"

"I'll call him to check, but we'll do it after class is over. I'm positive he'll stay to referee, or if he can't, one of the other black belts will."

"See you Saturday!"

"See you Saturday!"

I closed my phone, slipped it into my pocket, and went back to my homework.

LVIII. Aren't You Curious?

December 6, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Were you surprised none of the girls wanted to come along?" Kara asked as I turned onto Hyde Park Avenue to head for the Dan Ryan early on Friday morning.

"No," I replied. "They have their own lives, and they'll see everyone over Christmas break. And the boys all have things going on this weekend, though they're usually less likely to go with us than the girls. Not to mention Matthew was just in Cincinnati and saw Grandpa A and Jake."

"Did you let Sheriff Emmy know we're going to be in town?"

"When I called, she said Mike had let her know and invited her and her daughter to dinner tomorrow with Mike and his family."

"His colleague, Clarissa Saunders, will join us as well," Jessica added. "Along with her wife, who runs the Emergency Communications Center for the City of Columbus. Clarissa's son will be there as well."

"Not 'their son'?" I asked. "I thought her wife was a long-term relationship."

"They don't handle it the same way Jennifer and Josie do," Jessica replied. "It's Mike's son."

"Innnteresting!" I chuckled.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Tiger!" Jessica said mirthfully. "He was conceived artificially."

"He has three girls with his wife, plus his son?" Suzanne asked.

"Two with his current wife. His first wife died the day she gave birth to Mike's eldest daughter."

"Jesus," Suzanne breathed. "Complications?"

"She suffered an intraparenchymal bleed, due to a congenital arteriovenous malformation," Jessica replied. "That's a vascular anomaly where an artery and vein are directly connected, rather than via capillaries. Without the capillaries, there is no dampening of the pressure of blood moving from the artery to the vein. That deprives the surrounding area of the usual function of capillaries, which can lead to a buildup of carbon dioxide, and a lack of nutrients to cells.

"Over time, it grows into a nidus which has no capillaries and is extremely fragile. His wife's blood pressure went up, which caused the AVM to expand and bleed due to the abnormally direct connections between high-pressure arteries and low-pressure veins. It was within the medulla oblongata, and that's routinely fatal due to damage caused to the vagus nerve, which is crucial to circulation and pulmonary function.

"He raised Rachel, his eldest daughter, as a single dad for about sixteen months, then married Kris. Kris adopted Rachel, and is the only mom Rachel has ever known, but they did explain the circumstances to Rachel when she was five. Mike and Kris had two girls together, Charlotte and Noémie, and then he and Clarissa had Aleksandr, who goes by Alexi. Alexi calls Mike 'Dad' and Clarissa 'Mom', but calls Tessa, Clarissa's wife, 'Aunt Tessa'.

"French and Russian?" I asked.

"Mike is half Russian, half Dutch, Kris is French, and three of her four grandparents were Russian. Clarissa calls Mike 'Petrovich' and decided on a Russian name for their son."

"Not quite as complicated as our situation. Mike's Orthodox; how does that work with church?"

"You'll have to ask Mike that question," Jessica replied. "I honestly don't pay any attention to that."

"You mentioned he served his Residency in McKinley. How did he end up in Rutherford?"

"When he completed his Fellowship, the Medical Director at Rutherford Regional Hospital called and offered him the Chief Attending spot. Mike's originally from just outside Rutherford, so he took it, on condition that they hire Clarissa, which they did. She's Chief of Internal Medicine."

"Out of curiosity, why is Mike not Chief of Emergency Medicine?"

"He is. As a smaller, regional hospital, they just don't have a formal position the way UofC does. Mike reports directly to the Medical Director. They're working on their Level I certification. Mike and Clarissa started the Residency program there two years ago."

"How does that work?" Suzanne asked. "If you aren't a teaching hospital, you don't have Residents, right?"

"Correct. Everyone was an Attending, but they were small and were a Level III center until right before Mike was offered the position."

"How old are the kids?" I asked.

"Rachel is fifteen, Charlotte is twelve, Noémie is ten, and Alexi is seven. His sister and her family are joining us as well."

"How many kids do they have?" Kara asked.

"Two," I replied. "Michael is fifteen and Jordan is twelve. And Emmy's daughter Carrie is twelve as well."

"The girls should have come along," Kara said. "It would be good for them to meet all these kids."

"I believe Matthew has met some of them," Jessica observed. "Mike mentioned his daughter and some of her friends, along with Mike's adopted niece, went to the zoo with Matthew and Chelsea."

"Small world," I said. "Matthew never mentioned that, but I'm not surprised given the Orthodox kids who visited him likely know the Loucks family."

"Just so you know, Kris goes by her maiden name, which is traditional in France, and their three kids have Korolyov-Loucks as their surname, and Mike's son has Saunders-Loucks as his surname. Of course, in Russian style, his kids all have patronymics similar to what you did with the boys."

"What else are we doing besides lunch today at Joyce's house, lunch tomorrow with your other friends, and dinner with Mike and his family?" Suzanne asked.

Those other friends were Martin, Vickie, Cecily, and James, and James was going to spend some time with Jessica discussing an Attending position in Chicago, as Cecily was planning to attend IIT. She wanted to work for me, which was a

slightly tricky problem, given the rule Liz had made about girls I'd been with, but I could easily point to James being Jessica's colleague and Cecily being his wife, which, by then, she would be. It was subterfuge, but I didn't feel Cecily should be punished for asking me for sex lessons.

"Spending the rest of the weekend in bed!" Kara declared. "What else?!"

Jessica and Suzanne both laughed, and I just shook my head.

"She does have a one-track mind!" Suzanne declared.

"Are ANY of you complaining?" Kara asked.

"Not me!" I declared quickly, causing all three of my wives to laugh.

"Tiger knows on which side his bread is buttered, that's for sure!" Jessica declared mirthfully.

"Tiger is not *always* a «jävla idiot»!" I declared.

"Did you decide if you were going to contact Danielle's friend?" Kara asked.

"I hadn't really given it much thought. I only mentioned it as a possibility, given our general agreement."

"You aren't at least a little curious about her 'dark fantasy'?"

I chuckled, "No, but YOU are!"

"I'd bet it's a 'daddy' fantasy," Jessica said.

"Gee, thanks," I deadpanned. "Because I'm old, so what else could it be, right?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Jessica declared.

"He's messing with you, Jess," Suzanne said. "It's the same thing he does with Penny!"

"Penny deserves it!" Jessica protested. "What did I do to deserve it?"

"Be born?" I suggested.

"TIGER!" Jessica growled.

"Oooh, I like the feisty tigress!" I declared.

"You can't win, Jess," Kara said. "He's perfected his teasing with Birgit, Jesse, and Penny."

"Hmph!" Jessica grumped.

"Do you have a problem with the 'daddy' fantasy?" Kara asked.

"Birgit sure doesn't!" Suzanne declared mirthfully. "And I suspect that would be what ultimately led to Steve not wanting to do that."

"On the contrary," Kara countered. "He *wanted* to, but knew he *shouldn't*, so he didn't."

"Actually," I said, "I never had the fantasy and never thought about it, except in the sense of knowing Birgit was going to ask. I didn't actually try to imagine what it would have been like. So I'm not sure 'wanting' is the right word, unless you're referring to wanting to make Birgit happy. But I drew that line and knew I'd say 'no' even before it was discussed."

"I know you don't do 'What if?' Kara said, "but might there have been circumstances where you would have?"

"Not that I can think of, because in that alternate reality, who knows what else might have happened? You would have to posit a world where Stephanie and I either were never together or it hadn't ended so badly, and one where Birgit was very different from the Birgit we know."

"Which is his exact problem with those kinds of speculations," Suzanne observed. "Back to Danielle's friend, it could also be bondage or S&M or some kind of cosplay fantasy."

"Or a rape fantasy," Jessica added. "Those are perversely very common."

"And strange," I replied. "Because rape is about violence and control, not about sex."

"I think you're conflating the reality with the fantasy," Jessica countered.

"Maybe," I replied. "And the only person to ask me to do that in the last twenty years was Alicija Czerwinski, and I turned her down flat."

"If you don't want to answer, it's OK, but you did do that for Jennifer in High School. Why then?"

"I was naïve and hadn't fully thought out my position," I replied. "I don't have a problem with light bondage, but that's different from a rape fantasy."

"Going back to the 'daddy fantasy'," Kara said, "you did a 'brother fantasy', right?"

"Yes, and while the sex was amazing, it led to problems between Suzana and Peter."

"But that was him, not her, right?"

"Yes. She was fine, both with the pretend and with the reality. He reacted badly afterwards."

"I think you should at least find out what her fantasy is," Kara encouraged.

"Of course you do!" I chuckled.

 Birgit

"What are we doing after pizza tonight?" I asked Jesse.

"The guys all want to see *Die Another Day*, the Bond movie," he replied.

"Of *course* they do!" I declared. "They all have fantasies of drinking martinis, shaken, not stirred, killing bad guys, and banging Bond girls!"

"Halle Berry and Rosamund Pike are hot!" I declared.

I rolled my eyes, "You don't *need* Bond girls! You have your choice of basically every girl at Kenwood Academy or The Lab School! Well, minus the lesbians."

"And you don't have your choice of any guy?" Jesse countered. "What about Pierce Brosnan?"

"He's OK, but the younger Sean Connery was to die for! And he's *still* good looking!"

"Mom One says a tuxedo makes just about any guy look hot!"

"Which Bond girl, if you had to choose?"

"Either Agent Triple X from *The Spy Who Loved Me* or Honey Ryder from *Dr. No*."

"Which actresses?" I asked.

"Barbara Bach and Ursula Andress. Barbara Bach is married to Ringo Starr."

"Let me guess, Tomás wants to see the movie."

"He said so, but knowing you, I'm positive you'd be able to convince him to do something else!"

"I haven't even been on a date with him!" I protested.

"And?" Jesse smirked.

"What-ever!" I replied, rolling my eyes. "I'm going to take a shower and get dressed."

I left the coach house and went back to the main house, then went up to my room. I opened my walk-in closet and thought about what to wear. I decided on royal blue underwear, navy chinos, a light blue blouse, and a navy blue scarf. I added white socks, a white belt, and white loafers. I put everything on the bed, then stripped off my clothes and checked myself in the full-length mirror.

"Birgit Adams, you are still sexy!" I declared.

I needed to trim my pubes, and also shave my legs and under my arms, so I got the electric razor and correct guide to make my blonde pubic hair the perfect

length, then used a razor and gel to shave my legs and under my arms. I finished by using the razor to perfectly shape my pubes, then got into the shower. I washed my hair with cherry blossom shampoo and my skin with cherry blossom body wash. When I was clean and fresh, I got out, dried my body, then used a blow dryer on my hair.

"No man can resist you, Birgit!" I declared when I checked myself in the mirror before getting dressed.

I dressed, then went downstairs to let Natalie and Yuriko know I was leaving, then walked to the coach house so Jesse and I could walk to Giordano's together.

"Who's the lucky girl tonight?" I asked with a silly smile as Jesse and I left the coach house.

"Since CeCe left for college, I usually don't have a Friday night friend," I replied.

"What about Zahra?"

"I'm having lunch with her tomorrow, but she wants to see the movie tonight and you know she has an 11:00pm curfew, so it's cutting things close already."

"We *all* have the curfew," I complained. "It's just that Dad doesn't enforce the city's curfew. We just have to be careful."

"Which means I might have to borrow the car to take Zahra home after the movie, because her parents won't accept her being even one minute late. Is Zaida joining us?"

"Just for dinner, as usual. Fangsu will be there, of course, and you know Missy has to be at her dad's house."

"We're going out a week from tomorrow."

"When do the playoffs start? I didn't check Dad's calendar."

"January 11th."

"You finished first in the league, right?"

"So long as we at least tie one from our two remaining games, but we plan to win both."

"I know I'm changing subjects, but when will you take the SAT and ACT?"

"In April. I thought about sooner, but if we go to regionals or state, I don't want to have to try to reschedule the tests when dates would be filled."

"UW Madison with Jerry and Mia?"

"That's the plan, but it'll only be the first year, because they'll graduate at the end of my Freshman year."

We arrived at the restaurant and I went to sit next to Tomás, while Jesse sat next to Zahra.

[Rutherford, Ohio]

 Steve

"The rooms are absolutely gorgeous," I said to Paul and Liz when we finished the tour. "And the suite is as nice as any top hotel I've seen."

"We'll leave you to it!" Liz said. "Enjoy your evening."

We unpacked, then went to The Yolk's On You for a light dinner. None of us were very hungry because Joyce had made a veritable feast for lunch with her and Jake.

"The one downside to the new rooms is that the six biggest rooms in the older part of the motel have the Magic Fingers beds!"

"YOU have magic fingers, Tiger!" Jessica declared.

"Yes, but the vibrating bed could be fun!" I countered. "But I'm sure we'll manage."

"What time are we leaving on Sunday?" Suzanne asked.

"I figured late morning so we could sleep in if we wanted," I said. "Anthony isn't expecting us until dinner, which gives us plenty of time for lunch with my dad."

"Did you gamble when you visited last time?" Jessica asked.

"Seriously?" Kara asked quickly. "With *two* college girls to blow on his 'dice'?"

"No, I didn't," I replied. "And it wasn't that Aurora brought her friend Shannon, but that I feel it's too risky. You know that technically, even our poker tournaments at Guys' Night are illegal, right?"

"That's just so stupid!" Kara declared. "But that's why the buy-ins are locked in a box in your study in a locked drawer, and only chips are on the table. The same for your cash game afterwards."

"In theory, we could be caught, but that would mean someone from the group turning us in. What are the chances of that?"

"Zero!" Kara declared. "At the risk of triggering a rant, the government needs to butt out of consensual activities of ALL kinds."

"You'll get no argument from me!" I declared.

The waitress took our orders, which were salads for each of us, though we each ordered slightly different variations.

"Jess, are you going to be able to help James?" I asked.

"I think so. We'll have two Attending positions open in June, and with Mike's recommendation combined with mine, Dad will easily be able to make it happen."

"Mike is going to give up his Resident without a fight?"

"With Cecily accepted at IIT, James is leaving no matter what, so it's not as if Mike has a real choice. And he's known about this since Cecily and James began seeing each other two years ago."

"After expert instruction from Steve!" Kara tittered.

The waitress brought our salads, and we began eating.

"What will you do about your *Consigliere*?" Suzanne asked.

"Nothing. By the time Cecily comes to work at NIKA, she and James will be married, and six years will have passed. Cecily isn't going to say anything, and neither will I. Liz won't even ask, because Cecily be a top student at IIT, have Dave's recommendation, and be the wife of one of Jessica's colleagues. So, unless one of the three of you rat me out, there won't be a problem.

"The main concern my *Consigliere* has is optics, especially since the Janice Parker debacle. But the three of you know I'm not involved with anyone who works at NIKA, with the exception of Elyse, and even with her, we haven't been together in quite some time. I have a feeling that if we are together again, it'll be on some very special occasion. It's just not who we are at this point."

"Does that bother you?" Jessica asked.

"No," I replied. "You know I've always allowed the girls to define the parameters of the relationship."

"You're really OK with that?" Kara asked.

"It's how I've been since I was fourteen," I replied. "And probably even before that. But it's also the case that together the four of us have created a very stable relationship, fulfilling what Bethany and I figured out in High School -- that I was only truly stable with three women who were close to me."

"Don't forget your doses of virgin blood!" Kara smirked.

"Fewer and further between," I said. "And it's college-age girls who are interested now."

"And with the way society is going, that's not going to reduce your opportunities for virgins in a meaningful way. Not to mention the small cadre of High School girls who do find you interesting."

"And I have to be exceedingly careful with them," I said.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"You know I play hockey," Tomás said as we sat together on the train into the city. "What do you do?"

"I'm a 1st Dan black belt in Shōtōkan."

"Right, and I'm the King of Spain!" Tomás declared.

"I could prove it, but then you'd need to visit my mom, the trauma surgeon at UofC! Or I could show you my trophy for being the under-eighteen city champion!"

"I knew your dad was a black belt, but didn't realize you were practicing karate. Do you have any other hobbies?"

I was SO tempted to say 'fucking', but decided it was better to give a straight answer.

"Photography," I replied. "I'm in the Photography Club at the Lab School. What about you?"

"My dad and I build model airplanes and model ships."

"Military or civilian?"

"Both, but mostly military," Tomás replied. "You're a Freshman, right?"

"Yes. You, too, right? Though not at Kenwood Academy?"

"Saint Thomas More Academy. Are you Catholic?"

"Loki-ite!" I giggled.

"I don't know that one."

"Loki is the Norse god of change and chaos, also called the Trickster. I don't really worship him, I just joke about it. I'm basically an atheist. How serious are you about church?"

"We go every Sunday, but my mom is the only really serious one."

"How many kids are in your family?"

"Four. I'm the oldest. You have seven, right? Including two brothers who don't live with you?"

"That's right. Four brothers and two sisters. You know Jesse and Albert, but Matthew and Michael live in the burbs with their mom and her boyfriend."

"Is it really true your dad has multiple wives and girlfriends?"

"It is, but we don't talk about it because people get seriously bent out of shape about it."

"Which one is your mom? I mean, the one that had you?"

"The chemistry professor. She's the older of the two blondes. The strawberry blonde is the medical doctor and is my other mom. The younger blonde is a student, and she's not a mom."

"Which kids have the same moms?"

"Stephie and I have the same mom, Albert and Ashley have the same mom, Matthew and Michael have the same mom, and you know about Jesse, I'm sure."

"I think my mom would flip out if she knew. I don't think I'll tell her."

"Probably smart."

"Are you allowed to go on dates?" Tomás asked. "I mean, besides with the group?"

I was allowed to have boys stay in my room overnight! But again, not something I felt I should say.

"Yes. My parents allow me to run my own life and decide what to do."

"My younger sisters won't be able to date until they have their *quince*. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes."

"And my dad made it clear he'll have to meet the boys and approve."

"But you don't have the same rules?"

"No, because I'm a guy."

"Grrr," I growled. "That's SO wrong!"

"My dad is from Colombia and is very conservative. My mom is Mexican, and almost as conservative as my dad. They have very clear views on boys and girls."

"I hope you don't agree with your parents!"

"Well, if I did, I'm smart enough to say I no longer do!" Tomás declared.

"Did you agree with them?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"Wouldn't your brothers protect you?"

"Yes, but that doesn't include treating me like a second-class citizen!"

"I think I'll be quiet now unless I'm agreeing with you!"

I couldn't help but laugh.

"As much as I like that idea, you should be your own person."

"Have you had a boyfriend?" Tomás asked.

"No, I've just hung out with different guys. I've gone on a few dates, but mostly it's like tonight."

"I thought that Philip guy was your boyfriend."

"We went out a bunch of times but we didn't click," I replied.

"How do we click?" he asked.

"Do what I say, when I say, how I say!" I declared with a silly smile.

"So, like every OTHER girl on the planet!" Tomás declared.

I laughed hard, because he had a very good point.



December 7, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Your dad isn't coming to the rink today?" Libby asked as I drove to Johnny's Ice House.

"He and his wives are in Ohio," I replied. "Hoping to get lucky?"

Libby laughed, "He usually doesn't miss, and he's missing two in a row, so I was surprised."

"I noticed you didn't deny it!" I teased.

I looked in the rearview mirror and saw Libby roll her eyes.

"Well," she smirked, "I'll be seventeen on Tuesday, so he wouldn't get in any trouble..."

"You'd really do it?" Lilibeth, who was sitting in the middle row of the minivan with Libby, asked. "Isn't he kind of old?"

"*Older*, but not 'old'. It would be creepy if he hit on me, but he never has."

"And he won't," I said. "There's also no guarantee he'll say 'yes' if you ask. And you know what it means."

"Not that you and I do that at this point," Libby countered. "And I'm not blaming you, it's just the way things developed, mainly because I want something different in my relationships from what you want."

"I hear that all the time," I replied. "So many girls want to pair off, and I think that's a mistake in High School."

"Says the guy who was basically joined at the hip to Francesca for his entire life! Well, until her mom went completely *loco*."

"And it might well have worked out if her mom hadn't been completely nuts, but it also showed me that even what appears to be a perfect relationship can fall apart. I learned a valuable lesson from that relationship, and one of them was that I was too young to make that kind of decision."

"But you had!" Libby protested.

"No, actually, I hadn't *decided*, it was just how things developed. Now, with nothing like that, it's a decision. Look at what happened with Stephie and Nicholas."

"Short-lived," Libby observed. "As soon as puberty kicks into full gear, you know they'll be going at it like bunny rabbits! She just matured faster than he did, which is normal."

"The last thing I want to think about is my sister's sex lives!" I declared. "Or anyone else's, for that matter."

"Speaking of Stephie and Nicholas, where is Nicholas this morning?"

"His mom and Tom are coming to the game. Tom isn't on shift today and Aunt Bethany and Dad made up, at least enough that they're civil to each other."

"She really didn't go to Nicholas' games because she had a fight with your dad?" Lilibeth asked.

"It's way more involved and complicated than that, and it wasn't just my dad, but his whole circle of friends, and the parents of the kids we call 'cousins'."

"I never understood what happened," Libby said. "Just bits and pieces."

"Without going into gory detail, she did an almost complete one-eighty on her views from *Smart Teens; Smart Choices* about teenage sex."

"SERIOUSLY?!" Libby gasped. "What the fuck?!"

"Yeah, I know. She got on my dad's case about his sex life, which bugged him but didn't really cause trouble. It was when she decided to stick her nose into mine, and the cousins', that Dad, Aunt Kathy, Aunt Elyse, and my dad's wives became really upset with her. She wanted to publish a new version of her book which basically said teenage sex was always bad, and that 'power disparity' and 'experience disparity' made having an older, experienced partner not just wrong, but abusive. And that would have included you and me."

"Oh, bullshit!" Libby declared. "No wonder your dad and his friends were upset with her!"

"Dad seems to have talked her at least partway off the ledge," I said as I turned into the parking lot at the ice rink.

 Birgit

"Hi!" I exclaimed when Kevin walked into the dojo about ten minutes before class.

"Hi!"

"Sensei Will said we can spar after class. He'll stay to referee, and my sisters will stay to watch. I'm sure others will stay, too. Same rules as the tournament."

"Works for me!"

"Do you have time for lunch after we spar? I don't need to be home until 1:00pm when my friends are coming over."

"That should be OK. I drove, so I can be flexible. I don't see your dad. Is he in the locker room?"

"No, my parents are in Ohio visiting friends. He saw me beat you once, so it's not as if he's going to miss anything!"

Kevin laughed, "You're awfully confident!"

"I'm just that good!" I declared.

"Ms. Adams," Sensei Will said sternly. "You know braggadocio is NOT permitted in this dojo. Twenty pushups, now!"

I suppressed a groan because if I groaned it would earn me even more exercises. I immediately dropped and did my twenty pushups, though he allowed girls to do them with their knees on the mat, so they weren't TOO bad. I finished my pushups then we took our spots in the lines. Kevin had a higher place than I did because he'd had his belt longer.

Class was typical, and at the end, Sensei Will announced that Kevin and I would spar, and most of the students decided to stay to watch. Despite my claim before class, it was a tough match, and I lost the first round 3-1. I recovered to win the second round 3-2, but then lost the third round 3-1 again. Kevin was declared the winner, we bowed, then went to the locker rooms to change.

 Jesse

St. Ignatius Prep pressed hard from the first drop of the puck, and I had to make five saves in the first two minutes, with Freddy blocking two shots. The downside for them was that their attack ran out of gas after about four minutes, and that allowed Jack, Tom, and Nicholas to score in quick succession -- three goals in just under five minutes.

Being up 3-0 was good, but we had to continue playing hard, as momentum could shift quickly. The rest of the period was an end-to-end battle, with me blocking eleven shots and the St. Ignatius goalie blocking nine, with nobody scoring, allowing us to go into the locker room between periods with the 3-0 lead.

"We have to skate hard from the drop of the puck," I said to the team as we changed t-shirts and rehydrated. "We let them have too much time and too many shots during the first five minutes."

"They won't get the jump on us this time!" Tom declared.

"They shouldn't have the first time," Coach interjected. "Everyone is gunning for us, wanting to knock us down a peg. Every shift of every game needs to be our best, and we can't let up for a moment. Anyone who isn't a Freshman knows what happens if we have even a single bad period."

There was a collective groan from the team members who'd suffered that humiliating playoff defeat the previous year.

"We are not going to let that happen again!" Freddy declared.

"Only if we maintain focus," I observed. "We had some close calls in the first period."

The horn sounded, so we returned to the bench and I went onto the ice with the third O line and second D line, something Coach occasionally did to try to create a mismatch at the line change. It worked, and at the next line change, we had our first O line on the ice against their second O and D lines, and were able to get a goal when Tomás fired a hard shot from the point and Tom tapped in the rebound.

We ended up giving up a goal near the end of the second period, making it 4-1, and then in the third period we traded goals, with a final result of 5-2. I wasn't unhappy given how hard they had pressed, but I reproved myself for allowing in those two goals. Coach gave me a game puck for thirty-one saves, and another to Tom for a pair of goals. We had one more game before the long break, though we'd practice during that time.

After showers, I took Libby and Lilibeth home, then met Zahra for lunch at the diner across the street from UofC hospital.

[Rutherford, Ohio]

 Steve

My mobile phone rang not long before my wives and I were ready to leave the motel for lunch.

"Steve Adams," I said.

"Steve, it's Cecily. Would it be OK for two of James' med students to join us for lunch? He wants them to meet Doctor Jessica."

"Absolutely. Are Martin and Vickie bringing Cole?"

"No. He's with Martin's parents this weekend being spoiled rotten!"

I chuckled, "The role of grandparents throughout history! I intend to do that just to annoy my kids! See you in about fifteen minutes!"

We said 'goodbye' and I snapped my phone shut.

"James is bringing a pair of medical students so they can meet you," I said to Jess.

"Hmm...handsome young medical students..."

I chuckled, "And you know that you have complete freedom to act, should you choose to do so."

"It's no fun when I can't tease you!" Jessica complained.

"Sorry, Babe!"

"No you aren't! And if history is any guide, it'll be a pair of cute young women who will instantly fall for you and demand to have their brains fucked out!"

"Or fall asleep before anything happens because they're at the end of a thirty-six-hour shift!" I countered.

"They actually don't do that here," Jessica said. "Mike imposed an eighty-hour limit and a minimum of ten hours between shifts. The hospital where he trained did that not long after New York changed their regs. You know dad is lobbying for that at UofC but there isn't enough money to hire the additional Residents and Attendings. Until the AMA and others endorse it, we're probably stuck."

We all put on our shoes, left the room, and headed to Frisch's for lunch. We'd had breakfast at The Yolk's On You and dinner would be at Lou's, so Vickie and I had agreed on Frisch' for lunch. We arrived first, and asked for seating for ten, which they arranged by pushing tables together, and a few minutes later, after everyone had arrived, we were seated.

I nearly laughed out loud when the medical students turned out to be a married couple, Ed and Camile, who intended to practice family medicine together once they'd served their Residences. They were, unsurprisingly, much more interested in Jessica, as one of the most renowned trauma surgeons in the country, than they were in any of the rest of us.

I had a good chat with Vickie and Martin, and Cecily and I discussed IIT and her goal of eventually working for NIKA. I asked about her plans with James, and she said they'd marry in March, after she turned eighteen. Her parents didn't object to her marriage, but felt it was better to wait until she turned eighteen, and as she put it, the only difference was not being able to sleep at James' house every night. I wasn't sure I'd be back to Rutherford before she moved to Chicago, so I made sure she knew she was always welcome at the house, and she expressed interest in our Philosophy Club.

When we finished lunch, my wives and I headed back to the motel to relax for the afternoon.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Where do you go to school?" I asked Kevin as we walked to the diner on Hyde Park Avenue.

"Lane Tech. You?"

"The Lab School at UofC. My mom is a chemistry professor."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What?"

"There are rumors that your dad has a wife and a girlfriend who lives with you."

I almost laughed because it was WAY more complicated than that.

"My dad has a complex set of relationships, and I have two moms," I replied.

"My sister Stephie and I have the same biological mom, and my sister Ashley and my brother Albert have the same biological mom. Their mom is a doctor at UofC Hospital. But we all call both of them 'Mom', and Dad calls both of them his wives. Not legally, of course. And that doesn't include my three other brothers, who have different moms. One of them, Jesse, has two moms who are a couple, and then my brothers Matthew and Michael have a different mom."

"Your dad has seven kids by four women?"

"Yes. Sensei Sharon knows, but we're careful because so many people lose their minds when they find out about my dad's non-traditional relationships."

"You don't have a problem with it?"

I shrugged, "Why would I? We all love each other and it's been like that since before I was born. I love having a big family. How many kids are there in your family?"

"Just me and my younger sister who's fifteen."

"And you turned eighteen last Monday, right?"

"Yes. When's your birthday?"

"May 29th."

"You'll be fifteen, right?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I could ask you out after you turn fifteen. My parents won't freak out at that point."

I rolled my eyes, "If my parents would be OK with it, I don't see the problem."

"I'm four years older."

"And there is nothing wrong with a Senior asking a Freshman on a date if her parents are OK with it! Unfortunately, I understand. You could come to the dojo in January and I could visit yours in February. Sound good?"

"Sounds good."

 Jesse

Zahra and I had lunch, then walked back to the coach house, which we had to ourselves because my moms had gone straight from the hockey rink to meet with some friends.

"What did you want to do?" I asked.

"I thought that was obvious!" Zahra replied with a smile.

"We could probably use the sauna and whirlpool," I suggested. "My dad and his wives are in Ohio and Albert is hanging out with his friends."

"So there are no men? I mean besides you?"

"None. And we can put up the 'Privacy Please' sign so my sisters or my dad's girlfriends don't bother us."

"You want to do it in there?"

"We can. The heat and steam enhance it, and the whirlpool is fun, too."

"Did I make you happy last time?"

"Very! You're sexy and it felt really good! I love how you taste, too!"

"And you want me to taste you?"

"I like that," I replied. "But it's up to you. Only do what you want and what you're comfortable doing."

"I've never done it, but if you teach me how, I will."

"Then let's go to the sauna!"

I took her hand and led her from the coach house to the main house.

LIX. Who Provided the Referral?

December 7, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"You and Tomás seemed chummy last night," Tiffany observed when she, Hannah, Naomi, Leslie, Zaida, and I sat in the sauna together on Saturday after I led Dad's afternoon karate class.

"He's a nice guy," I said. "I'm hanging out with him tonight."

"Hanging out?" Hannah asked with a goofy smile.

"Not like that," I replied. "Well, most likely not."

"Why?" Leslie asked. "Did something happen?"

I contemplated what I should say, and decided I could talk to my closest friends, well, minus Fangsu and Zahra, who were now hockey groupies, and Missy, who was at her dad's house for the weekend.

"Philip was upset because I didn't want to be exclusive," I said. "And that's what happened with Peter, too. And I was dumb about things with Bob."

"How many boys have you been with?" Zaida asked.

"Five," I replied.

"WHOA!" Zaida gasped. "Really?"

"Yes. And three girls."

"WHOA!" she gasped again. "But..."

"I know your faith objects to both of those things," I replied. "But I don't agree."

"But girls?"

"Experiments," I replied. "Two of them were just me and a girl. The other one was with a girl and a guy."

"My parents would kill me!" Zaida said. "I mean, like, literally."

"Literally?" Hannah asked. "As in, they'd really do it? Not like 'I literally died' when you actually didn't?"

"I think my dad might because it's such a grave transgression."

"What would he say about you sitting naked in the sauna with us?" Hannah asked.

"It's girls only," Zaida replied. "He wouldn't be happy, but it's not a transgression for other girls to see me."

"The boys would be VERY happy to see you!" Hanna declared.

"Which is what worries my dad!" Zaida declared.

"That worries ALL our dads!" Naomi declared. "Sometimes I think my dad believes he can have grandchildren without me having sex!"

"I bet not!" Hannah exclaimed. "He knows you have to, and that's what bugs him!"

"Birgit's dad isn't freaked out about it," Tiffany observed. "Right Birg?"

"We're allowed to live our lives as we see fit, and Dad would never interfere unless he thought the boy was dangerous."

"YOU are the one who's dangerous!" Naomi declared. "You have your black belt, and we know what you did to that perv who put his hand on your shoulder at Water Tower Place!"

"I like older guys," I said. "But he was fat, dumb, and ugly!"

"I want an older guy for my first time," Tiffany said. "For sure."

And I knew exactly *who* she meant. I was positive that Dad would, so long as she wasn't dumb about it. It made me slightly jealous, wishing that could have been me, but I was positive she was making the right decision. For her, it was only a matter of when, not if, as I saw it.

"I think so, too," Naomi said.

"I have to wait for my husband, whoever he is," Zaida interjected. "Even if I think about it a lot."

"Every teenager thinks about it," Hannah declared. "That's normal. And each person has to decide when it's right for them. I'm not ready to do it, and I don't know when I will be. But it's up to me, not my dad or some religious leader."

"Or politicians," I added. "They're actually the worst, because they can decide to put people in jail for having consensual sex! They claim it's about protecting me, but I don't need their help in deciding who I want to be with!"

I made air quotes when I said 'help'.

"How old was the oldest guy you were with?" Hannah asked.

"Thirty-six."

"You're planning to live with your Swedish boyfriend when you're there, right?" Naomi asked.

"No. I changed my mind about that. I'll see him a lot, but I want more freedom."

"OF COURSE YOU DO!" Tiffany exclaimed, causing the other girls to laugh.

"What are we doing after the sauna?" Hannah asked.

"Let's go shopping!" Naomi exclaimed.

Everyone quickly agreed.

 Jesse

"That was really strange," Zahra said as she leaned back against me in the Jacuzzi.

"Remember what I said? If you don't like doing it, you don't have to."

"You liked it, right?"

"I did. I like using my mouth on you, too."

"Then I'll do it for you sometimes."

"Nothing would change if you don't want to. I enjoyed what we did before you did that!"

"The man is in charge," Zahra said. "So if you want me to, I will."

"As much as I like the idea of someone doing everything I want them to, I don't agree. Men and women are equal. Is it OK to ask what you didn't like?"

"It was just strange to have you in my mouth and for you to shoot. I'll do it sometimes, just not every time."

"Well, I like the taste of you, so I'll do that every time! And you seemed to like when I do that!"

"I did!" Zahra exclaimed. "Is that something everyone does?"

"I don't talk about stuff like that with my male friends, and I don't discuss what girls might do with other guys, so I only know what the book says, it says it's pretty common. But as with everything else, the only thing that matters is what your partner likes and what you like, and what you agree to do together."

"How long do you think you'll want to keep doing this?"

"For me, the only reason to stop would be if you had a boyfriend."

"I'm not allowed to date, so that won't happen," Zahra said.

"When will you be allowed?"

"When I turn eighteen. I can see you because I'm allowed to spend time with friends, and my dad trusts me because I've never argued with him about dating, and I always wear my scarf when I go out. Well, except with yoU!"

"But he doesn't know you're seeing me, right?"

"Just that I go to your hockey games with my friends then have lunch. As long as I'm home by 5:00pm, there won't be any trouble. And even if they knew I was at your house, they know I do homework with Birgit most days and that I'm friends with her. Zaida's parents are much more strict. She wants to, but is afraid of what her parents might do, and of what her future husband might think."

"You're not worried?"

"My parents would be severely disappointed and would insist I never see you again. I'm sure my dad would speak to your dad, too. And how would my husband know unless I told him? I won't. You want to keep doing it, right?"

"Yes."

"Again? Now?"

"Yes!"

[Rutherford, Ohio]

 Steve

"I hope you don't mind that my eldest daughter brought her best friend with her," Mike said when we greeted each other at Lou's.

"I don't mind at all."

"Her name is Abigail, and she met one of your sons the day after Thanksgiving."

"That had to be Matthew."

"Allow me to introduce everyone. My wife Kris; my daughters Rachel, Charlotte, and Noémie; my son, Alexi; Clarissa's spouse, Tessa; and Abigail Greene."

I greeted each of them, then introduced my wives, then introduced everyone to Emmy and Carrie. Paul introduced his kids, Michael and Jordan, and the Lou personally led us all to the private dining room. He'd created a set menu with three options, one of which fit my carbohydrate-restricted diet.

"How long have you been married?" Kris asked Jessica.

"Steve, Kara, and I married on December 15th, 1985. The three of us married Suzanne on July 7th of this year."

"Not legally, obviously," I interjected. "Jessica has the marriage certificate."

"I take it you don't go to church, Mr. Adams," Abigail said.

"Please call me Steve," I replied. "I'm an agnostic, and don't follow any organized religion. My eldest is Orthodox and attends a ROCOR church. The rest of the family does not. We do, on occasion, attend Paschal services, but it's been a few years."

"How did that come about?" Kris asked.

"Many, many years ago, we were exploring spirituality and a close friend suggested checking out the Orthodox church. I appreciated the ritual and spirituality, but it didn't take, except with Jesse, my eldest."

"I met his brother last week," Abi said. "Has he really been Chelsea's boyfriend for over ten years?"

"From her perspective," I chuckled. "She said she was going to marry him when he was five and she was eight or nine. It took him a few years to come around, but it turns out she was right."

"Which of you is his mom?" Abi asked my wives.

"None!" Kara declared. "Matthew and his brother are Elyse's sons. She was never a wife. Jesse, the son we're talking about, has two moms."

"So kind of like me," Alexi observed. "But I call one 'Mom' and the other 'Aunt Tessa'."

"What do the kids call you three?" Kris asked.

"It depends on the kids," Kara replied. "All the kids call Suzanne by her name. My two call Jess and me 'Mom'; Jessica's son calls us both 'Mom', but her daughter calls her 'Mom' and me 'Kara Mom'. The other kids call us Aunt Kara and Aunt Jessica."

"I kind of have two moms," Rachel said. "But I never met the one who had me because she died the day I was born. I was at my dad's wedding to my mom. And I went on their honeymoon!"

My wives laughed.

"We had an abbreviated honeymoon right after the wedding," Mike said. "She spent *those* days with my mom!"

"I hear you play in a band," Suzanne said to Mike.

"Code Blue. We got together when I was an undergrad. Well, four of us. Our fifth came along while I was in medical school, and Kris and I sing a duet at the end of every concert."

"What do you play?" Suzanne asked.

"Mostly classic rock and pop -- 60s, 70s, and 80s, and I also play a balalaika."

"His balalaika is from Russia," Rachel said. "Great-grandpa Mikhail brought it with him when he left Russia."

"Is he still alive?" I asked.

"Yes," Mike replied. "He's eighty-five."

"Same age as my dad," I replied. "My mom is twenty years younger."

"My grandma is only two years younger," Mike said, "but she's not in the best of health. My Dutch grandmother is about the same age and is in excellent health. She lives in Naperville."

Two cute waitresses, one redhead and one blonde, brought everyone's soup or salad. The redhead made eye contact and raised an eyebrow, conveying an interest. Despite the fact she was a nearly perfect 'Steve type', I felt the circumstances required that I simply let it go. I did smile, but that would, I told myself, be the limit of my response.

A bit later, after dessert, I discovered I wasn't the only one who noticed when Emmy came up to me and asked me to speak privately.

"Sherrie, the redhead, is obviously interested," she said quietly.

"Please tell me she's not one of Tim Saddler's congregation."

"No, she goes to the local Catholic church. Speaking of him, I did hear through the grapevine that Elizabeth Saddler paid you a visit!"

"Tabitha, right?"

"No smart LEO outs their CIs!" Emmy declared.

"Fallout?"

"Saddler was called in front of the Elder Board about his poor management of his family, and about the straying sheep."

Which was exactly what had happened to Kent van der Meer all those years ago, and he was, essentially, fired because Sandy had become pregnant.

"Well, given he's leading them astray, I'd say that's accurate either way you want to look at it -- theirs or mine."

"Mike agrees with you, obviously," Emmy said. "He put a smack down on Saddler nearly twenty years ago and Saddler still gives him a very wide berth."

"Something about which I am sure Mike is grateful. Changing topics, any new men in your life?"

"I'm dating a fire department lieutenant. Martin introduced us, and Carrie likes him."

"Serious?"

Emmy shrugged, "We'll see. He's a good guy, but I'm not sure I'm cut out to be married again."

"So don't. I seriously doubt that would hurt your re-election chances."

"I actually asked Tara Brooks about that and she agrees with you."

"She has a pretty good track record, so I'd heed her advice. I actually haven't spoken to her in well over a year. She's up to her eyeballs constantly, and doesn't get to Chicago and I don't get to Pittsburgh."

"Carrie informed me if he moves in, she's allowed to have a boyfriend! That's *your* fault!"

"How is it my fault?"

"Because you insisted I talk to her frankly about relationships and sex! She's twelve going on twenty!"

I chuckled, "You haven't met Birgit! She was too busy with school, friends, and karate to come on this trip, but that was an apt description of her growing up. Your job now is to gently guide her."

"Easy for you to say!"

"I have three daughters, so I have a pretty good idea. Birgit is fourteen, Stephe is twelve, and Ashley is eleven. And it's my eleven-year-old that everyone needs to watch out for! Her favorite saying is 'I think and I know things'."

"You should bring all your kids sometime."

"That becomes harder and harder each year as they get older and have their own lives."

"Your oldest is sixteen, right?"

"Yes, but they've been allowed to manage their own lives from the time they were toddlers."

"You're a crazy man!" Emmy exclaimed. "But it seems to work for you! Mike's kids have significant freedom, but nothing like what you're implying."

"We do tend to be outliers, though our closest friends are on the same basic program. Just remember one important point -- no matter what you think, you aren't actually in control. All you have to do is remember Vickie, Elizabeth, and Tabitha."

"You're just full of good news!" Emmy declared.

"And yet, you made it clear you didn't follow your dad's wishes with regard to boys."

"Oh, shut up!" Emmy exclaimed.

"Just remember that when Carrie is sixteen."

"I have a gun and a nightstick!"

"And I hold 6th Dan in Shōtōkan. None of those things will have any effect on what our daughters, or sons in my case, decide to do. All we have is the power of persuasion, and it has to be subtle, because the surest way to get a teenager to do something is..."

I paused for Emmy to answer.

"Tell them not to," she replied.

"Bingo."

We rejoined the others, and after refills of coffee or tea, we bade everyone 'good night'.

 Birgit

After the debacle with Philip, the misunderstanding with Bob, and the misjudgment with Peter, I wasn't quite sure how I should act with Tomás. I was torn between having a boyfriend and having what had happened with Peter and Philip, but also I was going to Sweden in about eighteen months, and there was no way I was going to try to maintain a long-distance, exclusive relationship with someone back home.

"No adults?" he asked when he arrived at 5:00pm.

I wanted to say that I was an adult, but I didn't want to get into a philosophical debate.

"No," I replied. "We actually have the house to ourselves. My dad, my moms, and Suzanne are in Ohio until Monday, my sisters and brother are at friends' houses, and Natalie and Yuriko are out with friends from UofC."

"My dad would never let my sisters have a guy in the house when they weren't home."

"My parents trust me to make good decisions, but they also let me decide what's best for me. Anyway, what did you want to do? You know we have a pool table,

we also have around a hundred movies on DVD, at least two hundred CDs, video games, and board games. We could order pizza, Italian, Chinese, or we could go out."

"What do you want to do?" Tomás asked.

"I'm OK with anything you want to do."

"Are you sure about that?" he asked with a smirk.

I laughed, "Positive. How about we order Chinese and we can discuss it?"

"OK!"

"Beef broccoli and cashew chicken which we'll share, with egg rolls, white rice, and hot and sour soup?"

"Sounds good to me! I'll cover half."

"Not necessary," I said. "Dad has an account and pays at the end of the month. I'm allowed to order on his account. Let me go call."

I went to the kitchen, called in the order, then went back to the great room. I suggested we go into the Indian room, and Tomás agreed. I turned on the stereo, put in a Barenaked Ladies CD, and then we sat down in basket chairs.

"This is a cool room. What is all the stuff?"

I explained Dad's statues, the remembrance items for our friends who had died, and also let Tomás know we could eat in the Indian room.

"How long have you practiced karate?" Tomás asked.

"Since I was six," I replied. "How long have you played hockey?"

"Since I was eight. I'm that weird Latino kid who finds fútbol boring and slow!"

"My brothers like watching European and South American soccer."

"When's your birthday?"

"May 29th. Yours?"

"It was in October."

"Fifteen, right?"

"Yes. I'm a Freshman like you."

"Nobody is like me!" I giggled. "So, what did you want to do after dinner?"

"I hear you have a sauna."

"We do," I replied. "If you're game."

"Game?"

"I usually use the sauna naked."

"I, uhm, don't want to get in trouble with your dad."

"This is not an invitation, but I could invite you to spend the night in my room and it wouldn't get you into trouble with my dad."

"NO WAY!" Tomás exclaimed in disbelief.

"Truth," I replied.

"I'm required as a red-blooded, American guy to ask how I get THAT invitation?"

"And I'm required as an intelligent young woman to insist you have an STI test for anything more than a good-night kiss. And that's true whether or not you've ever had sex."

"Is there a twenty-four-hour clinic with instant results?" Tomás asked with a grin.

"One step at a time! This is our first solo date!"

"But a naked sauna is OK?"

"We can use towels if you're uncomfortable with the idea or if you'll become VERY uncomfortable seeing me naked!"

"You think?!" Tomás asked, laughing. "How could I not?"

"Actually, guys get used to it after a few times. As my dad says, nudity does not imply sex."

"Not according to society!"

"Society pretty much *always* has its head up its butt!"

[Rutherford, Ohio]

 Steve

"Was Emmy propositioning you?" Kara asked, as we walked back to the motel.

"No. She's dating a fire department lieutenant. She was teasing me about the redhead who made eye contact and arched her eyebrow. Then we discussed the challenges of raising teenage girls."

"Carrie is twelve, right?" Kara asked.

"Yes, and told her mom that if the boyfriend moves in, then she, that is Carrie, is allowed to have a boyfriend. Emmy blamed me."

All three of my wives laughed.

"What about the redhead?" Jessica asked. "Another Evangelical girl Emmy was steering your way?"

"Catholic, according to Emmy. I don't need to stick my finger in Tim Saddler's eye again. He's already in Dutch with his Elder Board because of his daughters and Tabitha."

"You didn't stick it in their eye!" Kara tittered.

"So far as YOU know," I teased. "But going back to the question Jess asked -- this weekend is for the four of us."

"You know we wouldn't object, right Tiger?" Jessica asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I know."

"I had a good talk with Rachel's friend Abi," Suzanne said. "She'd fit right in at the compound! Free spirit, open mind, and parents who are very tolerant. She's

actually thinking about college in Chicago, possibly the Art Institute. Mike's girls are more Matthew's speed than Jesse's or Birgit's."

"NOBODY is Birgit's speed!" Kara exclaimed.

"Birgit isn't the problem," I replied. "Society is. It's simply not prepared for and won't tolerate teenagers who are mature enough to manage their own lives and make their own decisions. And it's not just Birgit. Think about Matthew and Chelsea -- is that relationship abusive in any way? No! But that's not what society would say.

"Or forget sex and think about Albert and flying. Or any of the kids and firearms training. Hell, society doesn't want *adults* to be free unless they conform to a very narrow view of socially acceptable behavior. Which, of course, is *not* managing their own lives and making their own decisions. That's why we've become circumspect about our relationships in public."

We reached the motel, and I used the key to let us into the room.

"Bethany is simply a harbinger of things to come," I said, as we all changed into comfortable clothes. "I could fend her off and even force an armistice, but her position is rapidly becoming the majority position. My mom, Kent van der Meer, Tim Saddler, and their ilk are winning the battle. If Bethany, who knows better, could succumb, anyone could. Heck, she'd complain if you decided to entertain those two med students James brought to lunch, even though they're in their twenties!"

"And married!" Kara smirked. "But if they were with Jess together, that would fit the rules!"

"Not my style," Jessica replied. "Not even something I'd have considered before Tiger."

"Bethany's point is so stupid," Suzanne observed. "And it means we withdraw even further."

"And do our best to shield the kids from the prudes and busybodies," Jessica interjected. "It's just wrong that Matthew and Chelsea can't even hold hands without drawing suspicion. And that's for more than another two years until he's seventeen."

"Germany and Sweden are far more rational and enlightened," I opined. "Along with most of the rest of Europe. Ohio is enlightened for the US, with sixteen being the age of consent. Technically, if you read the statutes, *The Godfather*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Bolero*, and *Pretty Baby* are all child porn because they all have actresses under eighteen showing at least their breasts, if not more."

"Bolero?" Suzanne asked. "Bo Derek was WAY over eighteen."

"Yes, but Olivia d'Abo was shown nude several times, including pubic hair, and was barely fourteen. And of course, *Lolita*, the novel. Heck, if I were to try to publish my journals, there is no way any major publisher would accept them with all the explicit sex with teenagers, even if I excised the ones under the age of consent in various states."

"There are bad people out there," Jessica said. "The difference is, you're the prey, and the girls are the predators!"

"Except for Kara," I replied. "The one girl I actually chased!"

"You wanted to fuck the most beautiful girl in the High School!" Jessica declared.

"And the most beautiful girl in the High School wanted to fuck the school stud!" Kara declared. "But it turned out Snuggle Bear was too sensitive to do that, and look what happened!"

I looked at Jessica and Suzanne, making eye contact and smirking.

"BIRGIT!" all three of us said in unison.

The four of us laughed hard, and I barely heard the knock at the door. I got up, walked over, and opened the door to find the redheaded waitress from Lou's.

"Hi!" she said. "Do you still offer sex lessons?"

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"Go for Jesse!" I said when I answered my mobile phone.

"Jesse, it's Luna Alonso. What are you doing right now?"

"Talking to you!"

"Obviously!" she said flatly. "What were you doing right before the phone rang?"

"I was about to go to Peter's house to hang out with him, Albert, Nicholas, and a few other guys."

"Could you change your plans?"

"They're expecting me for pizza. Why?"

"My parents are out of town and I thought maybe you'd like some company!"

I considered my options and decided to try to split the difference.

"What if we meet at my house at 10:00pm?" I asked.

"I suppose," she said. "Your moms would be cool if I spent the night?"

"Yes, but what about your dad?"

"I don't plan to tell him! And he's mellowed since he started playing poker and hanging out with your dad and his friends."

"He hasn't mellowed THAT much!" I chuckled.

"Well, no, but he won't call to check on me."

"One other point, I go to church on Sunday morning. It starts at 9:00am in Des Plaines."

"Well, my parents won't be home until tomorrow evening, so I could go to church with you, we could have lunch, use the sauna, and..."

"So long as 10:00pm is OK tonight."

"I suppose it has to be, given it's last minute, but my parents only decided to visit my uncle and his wife in Iowa City early this afternoon."

"Then I'll see you then!"

 Birgit

"I'd take care of that obviously VERY painful condition if you had an STI test!" I teased.

"That's just cruel!" Tomás protested, pulling a towel over his lap. "That made it WORSE!"

I giggled, "Sorry."

"No you aren't!"

"OK, I'm not. And I'm pretty sure I could fit the entire thing in my mouth!" I teased.

Tomás groaned, and I realized I was being cruel, as he'd said. He was good looking, in good shape, and nicely endowed. He wasn't nearly as big as Philip, but big enough and thick enough.

"It wasn't nice to tease you that way," I admitted. "Get your STI test and I'll do what I offered."

"No joke?"

"No joke."

"Where do I get a test?"

"The clinic at UofC or the free-standing one on Hyde Park Avenue."

"Have you done that before?"

"Yes. Have you?"

"I've never given a blowjob!" Tomás declared.

"Good to know!" I giggled. "So..."

"No. Just some making out. You?"

"Yes. But one step at a time, OK?"

"Do I look dumb?" he asked.

"Actually, you look pretty good!"

"So do you!"

[Rutherford, Ohio]

 Steve

My wives and I hadn't made any specific plans, so it was possible. I did have to make a decision, though with a redheaded 'Steve type' standing before me, and what Jessica had said earlier, it was basically a foregone conclusion. That said, I did need to follow the rules.

"I hadn't planned on it, but it's possible," I replied. "I do have some qualifying questions before the significant challenge. First, Who provided the referral?"

"Cecily. We've been friends since kindergarten. I'm a Senior, the same as Cecily."

That meant Sherrie was seventeen or eighteen.

"Given that, is it safe to assume you've taken the entrance exam?"

"Pristine!"

"Now for a significant challenge Cecily didn't have to overcome -- my wives are with me. I'm sure she explained my unique situation, at least enough that you knew it was OK to ask. That leaves you with three possible options -- you elect not to attend class; we go somewhere else; my wives watch."

"Watch?!" Sherrie gasped in surprise.

"Watch," I replied. "And because of the circumstances, to go somewhere else, you'd need to ask their permission. The choice is yours, and you can walk away now or come in, with the understanding you aren't committing to anything just by coming into the room."

"I, uhm, didn't expect any of that from what Cecily said."

I nodded, "I totally understand. Two years ago, I was here alone, plus the rules of engagement have changed slightly since then. Do you want to come in and talk? I promise nothing will happen that you don't want to happen."

"I suppose it's now or never."

"I seriously doubt that if you leave now, you'll never have sex!"

Sherrie laughed, then said, "That's not what I meant and you know it!"

"Perhaps," I replied. "Come in and meet my wives."

She stepped into the room and I shut the door behind her.

"Sherrie, meet Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne, my wives. Beautiful wives, meet Sherrie, to whom Cecily advertised that I give sex lessons."

"Hi!" all three wives exclaimed.

"I let Sherrie know that the circumstances are somewhat different, in that I was alone when Cecily, and the other girls, asked for lessons. I offered three possible options -- she could elect to leave, she could ask your permission for us to go elsewhere, or it could happen here with you three watching."

"We know which way Kara will vote!" Jessica exclaimed.

"There's only one vote that counts, and that's Sherrie's," I countered.

"As much as Kara might hate me for saying this," Suzanne said, "Liz Reynolds recommended a club about a quarter mile from here. We could disappear for a few hours."

"Oh, sure!" Kara grouched. "Ruin ALL my fun!"

"Not everyone is an exhibitionist or a voyeur!" Jessica interjected.

"I think the first question is whether she wants you all night," Suzanne observed.

"I need to be home by 1:00am so that no questions are asked," Sherrie said.

"Then we can go to the club or stay and watch," Jessica offered. "It's up to you."

"I, uhm, er," Sherrie stammered, "don't think I could do it with someone else watching."

"Then we'll go to the club, listen to live music, and come back about 12:45am," Suzanne said. "Right, Kara?"

Kara sighed theatrically, then said "I suppose."

"If Steve is worn out when we get back, he'll take care of you tomorrow!" Jessica promised. "With our help, of course!"

My wives grabbed their coats, and I gave them the car keys. Each of them kissed me, then left the suite. I led Sherrie to the couch and we sat down.

"First, did Cecily tell you I've had a vasectomy?" I inquired.

"Yes. That's one reason I wanted to do this -- I'm not on the Pill and I don't want to have to use a rubber my first time. I want to actually feel it!"

I chuckled, "I'm pretty sure you'll feel it either way!"

Sherrie rolled her eyes and said, "I meant when you ejaculate!"

"I was positive that's what you meant but I like to be silly! Second, and you can decline to answer, but how much have you done before?"

"I've made out with guys and had my boobs felt up outside my clothes."

"Third question -- why now and why me?"

"That's *two* questions!"

"Your powers of observation serve you well! Will you tell me?"

"Why now? Because Thursday was my eighteenth birthday and if I'd had a boyfriend, I'd have done it to celebrate. I was seeing someone until Thanksgiving, he was way too possessive. He got bent out of shape if I even talked to another guy. On the day after Thanksgiving, I had a shift at Lou's and

he accused me of flirting with a customer, even though I wasn't. I was just being nice to make sure the customer was happy. I receive larger tips that way.

"As for why you? Cecily had told me about you two years ago, but I wasn't even close being ready to do it. When I broke up with Trey, Cecily let me know you were going to be in town and might be willing. I wasn't sure, but then I saw you at Lou's, and concluded she was right about you being good looking and in great shape, and when we made eye contact, I had this strange feeling that sex with you would totally blow my mind."

The vibe was still active, and I wasn't taking any medication or doing anything that would attenuate it.

"Last question," I said. "Did you have an idea of what you wanted to do?"

"You're the teacher! But Cecily did tell me in detail everything you did and I've talked to friends who've done it. If it's up to me..."

"It's completely up to you," I said interrupting her.

"Then I want you to teach me to give a blowjob so I can taste you, I want you to lick me until I have an orgasm, then make love to me slowly and gently for as long as you possibly can. After that, for the rest of the time, teach me anything you want, or do what Cecily suggested -- screw my brains out."

"I can do that," I replied. "I do need to see your STI test results."

"Cecily made that clear," she said.

She opened her purse and proffered her test results form and I showed her my card.

"Everything appears to be in order with your papers!" I declared.

"Cute!" Sherrie exclaimed. "I should probably take a shower after a ten-hour shift at Lou's today."

"How about we do that together?" I suggested.

"Yes!" Sherrie quickly agreed.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"We usually shower after saunas," I said to Tomás. "We could shower together if you wanted."

"I want to, but it almost seems like torture!"

"I know, but I have to follow the rules in order to have freedom. But we could wash each other and I think you'll appreciate how clean a certain part of your body will be."

"Don't you get frustrated?"

"Sure, but I have a personal massager that works both outside and inside!"

"I have no clue what you're talking about," Tomás said.

"Come upstairs, we'll use my shower, and I can show you."

I set the controls on the sauna to turn on the exhaust, which was on a timer, then we put on robes and I led Tomás up to my room. I turned on the shower, then went to my nightstand, opened the drawer, and took out my vibrator, or as Osco

euphemistically called them, my 'personal massager'. I turned it on and touched it to his arm.

"So what do you do?" he asked.

"Press it against my button, or put it inside. Boys are better, both tongues and dicks, but this will do in a pinch! Let's get in the shower!"

I turned off the vibrator and Tomás followed me to the shower and stepped in.

"We have to be super-careful," I said. "Turn so your back is to me."

Tomás did what I asked, I picked up the soap, lathered my hands, then moved so my front was touching his back. I soaped his chest and his stomach, then moved one hand to his erect shaft and the other to his sack. I began stroking him while I gently squeezed his sack and about fifteen seconds later, Tomás moaned. His dick twitched, he groaned, and cum spurts from his dick, splattering on the tile in front of him. The rest of the spurts didn't fly as far, with the last two covering my hand.

I used the soap to make sure my hand was clean, then soaped the rest of Tomás' body. When I finished, I guided him on the spray, then took down the hand-held showerhead and rinsed all the suds from his body. When I finished, I put the showerhead back, and Tomás turned to face me. I handed him the soap, then turned my back to him and made sure our bodies touched.

"My nipples and right where my lips join, just below my pubic hair, are the most sensitive."

"You're sure you want me to touch you there?"

"Yes. Just be gentle and use soft touches. I'll guide you."

He soaped his hands and began running them over my body. I shivered from his touch, even though the shower was warm from the spray. He had strong hands, but he was gentle. My nipples got hard as he soaped my breasts, and I began to feel that warm, tingly sensation low in my belly. It got stronger as his hands moved downward and I moaned softly when he pressed on the flesh over my button.

"Slow circles with your fingertips," I moaned.

Tomás did as I requested and the fire continued building. I really wanted his finger or his dick inside me, but that would break the rules, and he managed to get me there after a few minutes. I groaned and shuddered, then turned and gave him a quick kiss. He finished soaping my body, and when he finished, he helped me rinse off.

I turned and pulled our bodies together.

"As soon as you have your test," I said quietly, "we can do everything."

 Jesse

I left Peter's house about ten minutes before I was supposed to meet Luna and hurried to the coach house. I saw Luna, who had a bag over her shoulder, walking towards me just as I reached the driveway, so I waited for her.

"Hi!" she exclaimed. "I brought clothes for church."

"Hi!"

We exchanged a quick kiss, and she followed me to the door. I used my key to let us in, and we went straight up to my room. We kissed, quickly undressed, and scrambled into bed. After two hours of energetic sex, she snuggled close.

"Freddy asked me who to invite to the party after Christmas," she said. "I only gave him names of girls I know will keep their mouths shut. Nobody on the cheer team, five girls from the softball team, two from the volleyball team, and three from the basketball team. All at least Sophomores. That matches the ten total guys from the team he invited, including him. You and I make eleven guys and eleven girls."

"He and I talked about the guys," I replied. "We agreed no Freshman as well, just to be safe."

"I personally spoke to each girl, and they all agreed to use the sauna naked. And promised to keep their mouths shut."

"I do have to clear using the sauna naked with my dad."

"He's cool, right?" Luna asked.

"Yes, but after the fiasco with the softball team, he did counsel caution. And because it's his house, I do need to ask."

"That makes sense, but he talked my dad off the ledge, so I think he can talk anyone off the ledge!"

"Don't be so sure," I replied. "There are some totally crazy parents out there!"

Rachel's mom, Francesca's mom, and Grandma A to name three!

"Well, let's forget about parents right now and think about what we're going to do next!" Luna declared. "How much sleep do you need?"

"Not much!"

LX. A Surprise Business Proposal

December 7, 2002, Rutherford, Ohio

 Steve

"You'll be the first guy to see me completely naked in my entire life!" Sherrie said as I led her to the well-appointed bathroom.

"Your dad never bathed you or changed your diapers?"

"He dumped my mom when she got pregnant. Mom married my stepdad when I was five."

"That man has no honor," I declared.

"Perhaps today IS a good day to lose my virginity!" Sherrie said in a gruff voice.

"And it was you who came to the door," I chuckled, "though you didn't beg!"

"As if I needed to!"

"Do you want to undress for me, or do you want me to undress you?"

"I think it would be sexy for you to undress me," Sherrie said. "But do it naked!"

I smiled and nodded, then quickly removed my clothes. Once I had finished undressing, I stood naked for Sherrie to get a good look.

"I like what you have for me!" Sherrie breathed. "And you're totally hot!"

I waited a few seconds, then stepped forward and began undressing Sherrie -- a red vest which held her name tag, a white blouse, black slacks, black socks, plain white cotton bra, and plain white panties, which had a small wet spot.

"Sexy," I said, looking her up and down.

She was, as I'd noticed at the restaurant, the epitome of a 'Steve type' -- small breasts capped with hard pink nipples, flat stomach, flared hips, neatly trimmed red pubic hair, plump labia, long legs, and the *crème de la crème*, or cherry on top, was freckles that dotted her face, shoulders, arms, legs, stomach, and breasts.

"Step into my shower," I said, taking her hand.

"Said the spider to the fly?" Sherrie asked with a smile.

"I believe you're enticing me," I replied.

"I'd say it was mutual, wouldn't you?"

"I would. Shall I wash you?"

"Yes," Sherrie replied. "That sounds so sexy."

I took the cherry blossom soap Suzanne used and had brought with her from the hanging shower rack, and began by working up a lather between my hands. I started with Sherrie's shoulders and worked my way down to her feet, enjoying the feel of her small, firm breasts and toned, muscular butt under my soapy hands.

"What do you do for exercise?" I asked, as I used the handheld showerhead to rinse the suds from her body.

"Tae Bo," she replied. "My stepdad and I go three times a week."

"It shows!"

"I hear it's similar to karate."

"It uses some similar techniques," I replied.

"The shower was nice," she said.

"We'll take one together afterwards," I replied. "Ready to start?"

"Yes!"

"I really enjoy shower blowjobs," I said. "Treat it like an ice cream cone, then like a popsicle, and you can use your hand to stroke my shaft. I prefer the girl to swallow, but I won't complain if you spit."

Sherrie smiled and stepped forward and we exchanged a soft, sexy kiss. She broke the kiss after about fifteen seconds, then carefully dropped to her knees. I leaned back slightly against the tile, then Sherrie grasped my shaft, planted a kiss on the tip of my dick, and began by licking my glans.

It was, by her admission, her first blowjob, but she quickly got the hang of it and I had the dual pleasure of her mouth and watching as she stroked, sucked, and licked. As was often the case, I was torn between making the pleasure last as long as humanly possible and not wanting to discourage a first attempt, so I simply allowed the pleasure to build.

"Soon," I said about six minutes later. "When I cum, just keep my glans in your mouth, suck and run your tongue around me, and stroke me."

A minute later, I groaned and the first blast of cum exploded from my dick. Sherrie did as I'd requested and lashed me with her tongue and stroked me while cum spurted into her mouth. After the last spurt, I felt her swallow, then take me as far into her mouth as she could before releasing me and standing up. We exchanged another soft, sexy kiss, then I turned off the shower, and we stepped out.

We dried each other, I grabbed a tube of lube from my shaving kit, then led Sherrie to the bed in the second bedroom so as not to mess up the king size bed where my wives and I would sleep.

"My turn to pleasure you with my mouth," I said.

"When we do it, how long can you go?"

"A long time," I replied.

I feasted on her wonderful breasts and her female juices for twenty minutes, bringing her off three times before applying lube and positioning my glans against her labia.

"Ready?" I asked.

Sherrie smiled, and sighed, "Oh, yes!"

I looked deeply into her eyes and pressed my hips forward. My glans split her sopping wet labia and easily slid into her tight tunnel. Sherri gasped, then moaned, and two short strokes later I was fully embedded inside her.

"Wow!" she gasped.

I smiled, lowered myself onto her, and she wrapped her arms and legs around me. I kissed her, and we began what promised to be a very pleasurable, lengthy lovemaking session.



December 8, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"We're Catholic," Luna said as we dressed for church on Sunday morning.

"What's the difference?"

"Our Divine Liturgy is more intricate and complex than your mass, but the basic structure is pretty similar. We don't use instruments, and pretty much everything except the Creed and the homily is sung or chanted."

"What about communion?"

"We have it, but we serve it in what you call both species, using a spoon. But only Orthodox Christians can receive communion. You can share in the *antidoron*, which is blessed bread, but like your church, we have closed communion."

"Do you go to confession?"

"Yes, but it's done face-to-face with the priest at the front of the church, facing an icon of Christ. And to anticipate your next question, we don't have confirmation, because we baptize, chrismate, and commune babies. Oh, and we can't eat breakfast before we receive communion the way you can. We have to not eat from midnight the night before. Technically, after Vespers, but most people don't follow that rule."

"So you don't eat breakfast?"

"No. We have fruit and cereal if you want to eat, and it won't bother me if you do. My moms don't go to church and almost always eat breakfast on Sunday mornings before I leave."

We finished dressing and went downstairs where Luna decide to have an apple and a slice of toast. Once she'd eaten, we left the house, got into Aunt Jessica's BMW, and headed for Des Plaines.

"I'm amazed you're allowed to drive your aunt's BMW!" Luna declared.

"Dad taught me in his BMW," I said. "He'd never allow me to do this if I wasn't a safe and careful driver. No tickets, no accidents, and I follow the rules scrupulously."

"My dad won't even let me get my license," Luna said. "He thinks the driving age should be eighteen."

"In the city, it's not that big a deal," I replied. "The L, busses, and trains make getting around pretty easy, but kids in the burbs would have serious problems because almost nothing is in walking distance and bus service sucks."

"I believe it, but my dad says it's too expensive to add me to his insurance."

"It's not cheap, that's for sure," I confirmed.

"Changing topics, what should we do about food for the party?"

"Ordering pizza is probably easiest," I said. "If everyone kicks in ten bucks, that should cover pizza, soft drinks, and snacks. I can place an order with Connie's

the day before so they know they'll have to make eight deep-dish pies, which should be enough for twenty-two kids.

"I think so, yeah. One of the girls on the volleyball team wondered if it would be OK to play 'Truth or Dare'."

"We'd need some pretty clear ground rules and everyone would have to agree in advance," I said. "And it has to be a free decision; no pressure. And depending on the dares, there's the concern of what people are willing to do and who they're willing to do it with, plus the problem of boyfriends or girlfriends."

"None of the girls I invited have a boyfriend; well, they go out, but they aren't couples. I don't know about the guys."

"Mitch and Fangsu are a couple, but he's a Freshman so Freddy didn't invite him. There is one serious flaw, though -- Tim is gay and nobody else is."

"Does he have a boyfriend? If so, we could ask one more guy to balance the couples."

"None of the girls are lesbian?" I asked.

"If they are, I sure don't know it. I'm pretty sure they're all straight, or at least bi. The only out lesbians at school are your friends Libby and Lilibeth. I'm sure there are more, but they're the only ones who show any kind of PDA."

"Libby is actually bi," I said.

"Thought so!" Luna said with a smirk.

"No comment."

"Oh, I know, but once you said that, it was pretty obvious from everything I've seen. I won't say anything."

"The more I think about it, the less I think 'Truth or Dare' with that large group would be a good idea."

"You're probably right. I'll tell her. It's not like there isn't enough to do at your house to have fun!"

"True!"

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

"If there's anything you four need, just call, please," Connie said when my wives and I checked in at the Marble Palace in Newport.

"Not that I can think of at the moment," I replied.

"Anthony wants a chance to speak privately with you," she said.

"We can do that as soon as we get settled into the room. Where?"

"His on-site office behind reception," she said.

"I'll come back down in about fifteen minutes."

"I'll let him know!"

I declined the bellman as we each only had a single bag, and I'd stayed in the suite before. I led my wives to the elevator, which whisked us to the top floor,

where I used the old-fashioned key, along with the modern security card, to unlock the door.

"This place is gorgeous!" Jessica declared. "I love the period decor."

"The only real downside is that the wall-mounted light fixtures are electric, not gas, but the local building code wouldn't allow that. That said, the specialty bulbs do a decent job of emulating the gas lamps."

"Where did he find all of this stuff?" Suzanne asked.

"Most of it is replicas," I replied. "The only non-replica pieces are in a private dining room and in the suites. It's too risky to put true antiques in regular rooms or common areas. I'm going to go see Anthony, and I'll come back to fulfill our promise to Kara before dinner!"

"You better, Snuggle Bear!" Kara said, trying to sound threatening, but the rest of us laughed.

I kissed each of my wives, then left the room and took the elevator back to the lobby, then went to meet Anthony in his office.

"I take it you're pleased with the financials?" he asked after we greeted each other.

I nodded, "I'm happy. Your idea has proved to be an excellent investment. I'm happy you offered me a taste!"

"What's the line? If you consider the money you invested merely 'finance', «te salut, Don Stephen»!"

"He was wise to stay out of the drug trade," I replied. "Gambling and prostitution were safe and tolerated, as you well know! Any trouble in that regard?"

"No. Well, one challenge, which Connie playfully suggested, was right up your alley!"

"Knowing Connie, I'm almost afraid to ask!"

"She does most of the recruiting for the escort side of the business and there's one thing she can't interview for..." he said with a smirk.

I laughed, "And knowing Connie, there is no way in hell she'd allow YOU to conduct those interviews!"

"As much as I might like to, she'd cut my balls off like any good Italian woman would if I did that! Not to mention her grandfather never once played around in all his years, despite ample opportunity, and I feel bound to uphold that level of integrity. Now, if Connie felt otherwise about me playing around..."

"Something that had to be negotiated in advance and that was never going to happen with her or Joyce."

"Interested?" Anthony asked with a goofy smile.

"Amused is probably a better term. You know my wives are going to ask, so to satisfy their curiosity, I'd be curious to hear what Connie suggested."

"Each applicant would spend a few hours demonstrating she's capable of meeting our demanding standards of expertise in the bedroom, the ability to carry on a scintillating, intelligent conversation, and how to behave in public. You know our usual clientele are interested in girls between eighteen and twenty-five, and mostly they come to us with no experience with being escorts or

any kind of sex work. The same is actually true of the women in their thirties. They're mostly bored, unfulfilled housewives, but I know your rule, so you'd never be involved in anything like that with them if you'd even take Connie up on her idea."

"What are the demographics of your escorts?"

"About seventy percent young college girls, about twenty percent in their late twenties, and ten percent in their thirties. I think we discussed them before, and they mostly go to company events as classy companions with men who, for business reputation reasons, can't have teenage arm candy."

"All of them are married?"

"About half; the rest are divorced. Want to know the number one profession of those women?"

"Teachers, right?" I asked.

Anthony laughed, "I should have known you'd know. We're discreet and no pictures are ever published. The divorced ones can pass it off as dating if they run into someone they know."

"As interesting as it sounds," I chuckled, "I don't think I can make it to Cincinnati often enough to make it happen."

"Connie said she'd send the girls who passed her interview to Chicago. She'd set them up in a hotel room and you'd show up and interview them."

I chuckled, "Tell Connie I very much appreciate the thought, but I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"I expected that answer," Anthony said. "I'll let Connie know. Are you still joining us for dinner?"

"Yes."

"Are you OK with Aurora joining us?"

"My wives know about her, so that's not a problem."

"Then we'll see you in the private dining room at 6:00pm. My chef spoke with Alex Saunders, so you'll have a full low-carb meal."

"I appreciate it."

We shook hands, I left his office, and returned to the suite.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Which performance are you going to attend?" I asked Chelsea.

"All of them if I can!" Chelsea declared. "I was thinking I could come to opening night by getting a ride from Aunt Elyse, then coming back into the city on Friday morning with Eduardo or her, or taking Metra. Then I can get a ride back out to Aurora on Friday because we'll spend the weekend there. Which night will your dad and the others attend?"

"He said the Sunday matinée was the best option, and then we'll have our usual family dinner at Mom's house instead of his. That works best for everyone except Aunt Jess, who said she'd skip karate on Thursday evening and come with some of her doctor friends."

"She'll miss dinner, though, because she works until 6:00pm."

"Dad said they talked it through and she's OK with that, given the circumstances."

"What's next after the Christmas concert?"

"*Fiddler on the Roof*," I replied. "Performances will be mid-March. Then we have *The Crucible*, with performances mid-May."

"Neither of those has any love scenes, right?"

"Right. I did suggest to Mr. Fruits that we actually have the pagan ritual in *The Crucible*, but he shot me down!"

Chelsea laughed, "Somehow I don't think he'd survive in his job after having high school girls dance naked on stage!"

"His job? He'd be arrested! The government has zero tolerance for teenagers being naked or having sex. Society is so messed up! You asked about the love scenes because of Maggie, right?"

"Yes. It's going to be a serious problem for the next three years."

"I know," I replied. "And there is literally no solution unless one of us drops out of drama, and that's not going to happen."

"There are always solutions," Chelsea countered. "It's just that they aren't ones that you'll accept."

"I'm not interested in any aspect of my dad's life plan, even if you would put up with that!"

"So no threesome with me and Maggie?" Chelsea asked with a silly smile.

"I'll do that as soon as you agree that you'll put your tongue in Maggie!"

"I'm straight!"

"Exactly! You won't, so I could safely say I would when you do!"

"Not suggesting this, but do you have that fantasy?"

"A threesome? No. That's Nick's fantasy, but as Arby said, Nick has to find ONE girl who'll have sex with him before he can have TWO!"

"You really never had that fantasy?"

"No. You said I was yours from age five, so I never thought about any other girls in any way."

Chelsea smiled, "I did claim you! And it worked!"

"I have zero complaints!"

[Greater Cincinnati, Ohio]

 Steve

"I think you should say 'yes!'" Kara declared. "I'll act as judge and we could charge!"

"That might be a bit much," I chuckled. "All teasing aside, we want to avoid any direct links or involvement with that side of the business. Our share of the profits comes purely from the reportable income from the hotel, and one of the firm

rules for the escort business is that it never happens in the hotel. That way, if any of the girls are ever arrested, there's plausible deniability."

"What about the gambling?"

"It's far easier for prosecutors and police to ignore than prostitution. The public doesn't really get outraged about gambling the way they do about anything to do with sex. Anthony runs the casino straight, which is fine for him because you'd have to actually make a concerted effort to lose money running a casino! Honestly, I think Connie's best approach would be to talk to her best customers and arrange for them to conduct the interviews."

"It's not Steve's sweet spot, either," Suzanne observed. "How many virgins are going to investigate being escorts?"

"Only in movies," I chuckled. "Like babysitting clubs where the girls sell sex to the dads -- pure fantasy. And yes, I'm sure it has happened at least once, but it's really a staple of porn and teenage sex comedies, not real life. I mean selling, because personal experience with a certain group of cheerleaders did happen!"

"On the other hand, the 'sugar daddy' trope is real, though I have no idea how common it is in real life. We do hear about those arrangements occasionally, and you could characterize my relationship with María Cristina in that way. I've also seen hints of it on Usenet as well."

"And the girl you're meeting in San Francisco in two weeks," Jessica interjected.

"I asked Scott Bannerman and 'Lucy Alexa' to call in favors, which they did. Keiki will have a full ride, along with a campus job for pocket money. That won't be official until March, but it's a lock, according to Lyudmila. Keiki said San Francisco is about properly thanking me."

"Of course it is!" Jessica declared. "'You helped me; would you accept my cherry as thanks?!"

"Or 'I want sex lessons, take my cherry!'" Suzanne added.

"If there are any glitches," Kara said, "let me know. I have some influence with the chemistry department that might help."

"Thanks," I replied.

"Don't you have a promise to keep to me, Snuggle Bear?" she asked.

"Indeed we do! Shall the four of us repair to the boudoir?"

"Yes!" Kara exclaimed happily.



December 9, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

Early on Tuesday afternoon, back in Chicago after four days away, *adium* alerted me to a new message, so I brought it up.

HawaiianNoises: Aloha!

NIKASteve: Aloha!

HawaiianNoises: How are things?

NIKASteve: Pretty good. How is Hawai'i?

HawaiianNoises: Warm and beautiful, as always!

NIKASteve: So like you, then!

HawaiianNoises: You know how to make a girl feel good! Want to?

NIKASteve: What did you have in mind?

HawaiianNoises: It's time for the universe to conspire to bring us together again!

NIKASteve: What I said to you when we saw each other in SFO in June.

HawaiianNoises: Why am I not surprised you remember every word of that conversation?

NIKASteve: Because you're an intelligent young woman!

HawaiianNoises: Thank you! Would I be welcome in Chicago?

NIKASteve: Of course. When?

HawaiianNoises: Early January. Do you have a Philosophy Club meeting on January 5?

NIKASteve: I have tickets to a hockey game for the 5th, so no.

HawaiianNoises: Bummer.

NIKASteve: If you were here for New Year's, we could have an impromptu rap session.

HawaiianNoises: I think I could. There's one complication.

NIKASteve: Oh?

HawaiianNoises: I have a boyfriend.

NIKASteve: That's a good thing! You can bring him if you wish.

HawaiianNoises: You're not upset?

NIKASteve: As much as I enjoyed our time in bed together, my role in your life is mentor, not sex partner. Not that I'd object in any way, shape, or form if you didn't have a boyfriend!

HawaiianNoises: I'd love to, but I'm sure you understand, especially given that rule is firm.

NIKASteve: It has to be.

HawaiianNoises: I'll check on flights and discuss it with Jun Hie

NIKASteve: Chinese-American?

HawaiianNoises: 2nd generation. I bet it won't surprise you that he's 37!

NIKASteve: Not at all. He's welcome, of course.

HawaiianNoises: Cool! Hopefully I'll see in soon! Have fun

with Keiki!

NIKASteve: I hope to see you soon, too. And you know what will happen with Keiki.

HawaiianNoises: Mindfuck first?

NIKASteve: That is the norm.

HawaiianNoises: I think she's prepared. See you!

NIKASteve: See you! Bye!

HawaiianNoises: Bye!

I was totally unsurprised that Nalani had a boyfriend who was significantly older than she was, which seemed to be a recent pattern. Of course, if society had anything to say about it, they'd put a stop to it, as I was already hearing public complaints about age differences as small as ten years. I made a note about Nalani's upcoming visit, then went back to work.

A few minutes later, Eve came to see me to ask if I wanted to see the space she'd leased at 550 West Jackson before the first moves occurred later in the week. I decided it was probably a good idea, so I agreed. We left the NIKA offices and walked towards the Loop.

"Any negative feedback?" Eve asked as we walked along Jackson.

"No. Everyone knows it's temporary, and given everyone had input on the new space, I don't expect any. Dave hasn't heard anything negative, nor has Penny. Have you?"

"No, but you're the person most people would go to."

"Long-term employees, yes; anyone hired in the past year or two? Not so much. I haven't even met some of the recent hires. I don't like that, but it's the price I pay for being a software engineer."

"You do seem very happy not to be involved in day-to-day operations."

"It was what I wanted from the start; that's how Four Dimensional Software was run."

"But you were good at it," Eve countered.

"Only in very specific areas. You know Elyse, Julia, and Cindi shouldered a significant part of the work."

"Acquisitions and taking down Dante were all you."

"Nothing was ever 'all me'," I replied. "I had a lot of help. You were a huge help in dealing with some of the challenges."

"I have to say I was amazed that you turned Anthony and Connie the way you did. Mark and I were at the Marble Palace on our vacation last month and it was awesome."

"We were just there," I replied. "Only one night, but I love the decor and the service."

We reached the building and went up to the 10th floor, which we'd leased for six months, with a month-to-month option after that.

"Only Dave has a dedicated office," Eve said. "The other four offices are for meetings or if someone needs some temporary privacy. The WAN circuit was live as of yesterday, and the phones will be working by the end of the day today."

"You have everything under control, exactly as I'd expect! Shall we head back?"

We left 550 West Jackson and walked back to the NIKA offices, and I went back to work on testing modules before the upcoming code freeze.

 Birgit

My phone rang as I was walking home from school with Fangsu, Zaida, and Zahra, so we could do homework together. I pulled it from my jean pocket and saw it was Teri NYC, which meant it was most likely Marcella.

"Hi, it's Birgit!"

"Hi, It's Marcella! What are you doing?"

"Walking home from school. We're an hour earlier than you, remember?"

"I always forget that!" Marcella declared.

"Because you think New York is the center of the world!"

"It is!" Marcella declared. "The Big Apple! Anyway, do you remember talking about Christmas break? Would you be able to come visit?"

"Remember I said my friend might come visit? He'll be here from December 27th to January 4th."

"Bummer! I was hoping to see you."

"How are things with Jillian?" I asked.

"Awesome. My parents think she's my mentor for computers, which is also true, and they don't object to us hanging out."

"That's cool."

"When do you think you could visit?" Marcella asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe Spring Break in March? Ours is the week of the 16th."

"Ours, too! Could you stay with your Russian friends?"

"Probably," I replied.

Of course, I could call Gabriel, the college student chauffeur, and stay with him and wildly fuck him as I'd offered!

"When can you let me know?"

"After Christmas break, OK?"

"Great! Have fun with your friend!" I said.

"Thanks! Talk to you in January!"

We said 'goodbye', I closed my phone, and slipped it back into my pocket.

"Who was that?" Fangsu asked.

"My friend Marcella in New York. She wants me to come visit during break, but Kjell will be here."

"Sleeping in your bed?"

"It would be a complete waste of eight days if he didn't! How was your date with Mitch?"

"It didn't go that far! How about you and Tomás?"

"If he plays his cards right, he'll be the happiest fifteen-year-old boy in Chicago!"

"Another guy?" Zaida asked.

"It's my body and my choice," I replied. "I'm on the Pill and I insist that the boys have STI tests. You all should do those things, too, if you decide to have sex. And remember, it's up to you who you decide to be with, not anyone else, especially society. And boys who talk about it should *never* get it!"

"How do you know?" Fangsu asked.

"If a boy tells you any details about what he's done and says a name, you know he's going to talk because if he tells YOU he could tell anyone."

"What's it like?" Zahra asked.

"I'm not sure I can describe it except to say that it feels really, really good. I mean, amazing and out of this world. Are you thinking about it?"

"Constantly!" Zaida declared. "But I have to wait."

"Which is totally up to you," I said.

We arrived at the house, got snacks, then went to the sunroom to do our homework.



December 14, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"What are you doing today, Dad?" I asked when we cuddled on Saturday morning after Dad, my mom, and Suzanne had walked my other mom to the hospital for her shift.

"Jesse's game is at 9:00am," Dad said, "and that means I'll miss the morning karate session, but I'll be at the afternoon one. Then I'll spend time with Avanti, then I have a guest. What about you?"

"A guest?" I giggled. "Uh-huh!"

"Do I concern myself with your guests?"

"No. "I'm having lunch with Tomás, and later, the Girl Gang is hanging out with Rachel in her new apartment."

"Remind me to notify the National Guard this afternoon!"

"Oh, please!" I exclaimed, "If it were all boys, then I agree!"

"Right, because girls don't ever cause any trouble at all!" Dad replied, sounding skeptical.

"Not as much as boys!" I declared.

"So you say!"

"I might want to go to New York at Spring Break to see Marcella. I'd have to ask Katya Anisimova."

"Would Marcella need to sneak out to see you?"

"I don't know," I replied. "She has a girlfriend, but her parents think she's just a friend."

"Just be careful, Pumpkin," Dad counseled.

"Always!"

"Remember, we're going to see Matthew's concert on Sunday afternoon."

"I remember!"

"Breakfast is ready!" Yuriko announced from the door to the sunroom.

"Two minutes," Dad said.

I got three.

 Jesse

"Thanks for coming over a bit early," I said to Libby.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I need some advice," I replied.

"You? Usually you give other people advice. What's the problem? Your gaggle of girls not satisfying you?"

I laughed, "More like the opposite!"

"You and I seem to have moved past that," Libby observed.

"I know. Should I apologize?"

"No. We always knew it would reach this point once you decided you didn't want a complicated relationship. So, teasing aside, what's the concern?"

"Scarlett," I replied. "She seems set on us being a couple to the point where she's thinking of applying to UW Madison for her Master's. I'm afraid she might transfer there even before that."

"I know you well enough that you didn't make her any promises and made it clear what your plans were."

"I did make it clear, but I think she took my giving a time frame of Junior or Senior year in college as the time to think about an exclusive relationship to mean I'd want one with her."

"Do you?"

"Maybe. But I'm not even seventeen yet, so I'm not ready to make that commitment."

"Not to mention all the nookie you get by not doing that!"

"And yet, for the right girl, I would."

"Francesca? I mean before."

"Yes."

"Of all the girls, who do you like best?"

"Akiko, but that's a really difficult situation because she lives in Japan and I live here."

"Difficult, but not impossible."

"True, but it seems a lot like the challenges my dad and Tanya Grigoryeva had. Well, she was Tanya Voronina when they dated. I think it's probably too big a challenge to overcome, though obviously I'm not ruling it out."

"And you're going to see her next Summer, so obviously you think there is some possibility. You certainly don't need to fly eight thousand miles to get laid!"

I chuckled, "Also true."

"I think with Scarlett you have to be even more blunt and direct to ensure she doesn't have the wrong idea."

"I was pretty clear," I replied.

"Can I ask my best guy friend a blunt question?"

"Always."

"You and Zahra?"

"You know I don't answer questions like that."

"OK, hypothetically speaking..."

"She wants to marry a Muslim and I want my wife to be Orthodox Christian. Complete impasse. I like her, but that's a chasm wider than the distance from here to Hiroshima with regard to any kind of long-term relationship."

"But not to short-term fucking!" Libby exclaimed.

"No comment."

"I'm out of the loop somewhat, but you and Brooke are still integrating; are there others?"

"From time to time," I replied. "Nothing like last year. I need to get my gear into Aunt Kara's minivan."

"Lilibeth will be here shortly, too."

I went to the basement and brought up my gear, and as I was loading it into the minivan, Lilibeth walked up the driveway. She, Libby, and I got into the minivan and I headed for Nicholas' house.

"This is going to be our toughest game of the season," I said as Nicholas got into the minivan with Libby, Lilibeth, and me.

"Why?" Lilibeth asked.

"Because Jesse's friends Mikey and Nicole go to Oak Park," Libby said before I could answer. "Nicole always does her utmost to score on Jesse."

"I say, 'good luck to her!'" I declared as I pulled away from the curb.

"You finish in first place no matter what, right?" Lilibeth asked.

"Yes," I agreed. "But that kind of thinking is a perfect way to lose our focus and lose a game. We lost focus in the playoffs last year and crashed out against a team which should never have beaten us. One-game playoffs are about focus,

determination, and a bit of luck. A single mistake or even a single bad call by a ref can turn the game."

"Are Mikey and Nicole still a couple?" Libby asked.

"Yes," I replied. "And they're both applying only to colleges that have both men's and women's hockey. The NCAA finally got off their butts and started a women's championship last year, which I think will cause more schools to offer women's hockey. Right now, they're thinking University of Minnesota or University of Wisconsin. I hope they decide on Madison, but a lot depends on if either of them is offered a scholarship."

"And you're going to UW Madison, right?" Libby asked.

"That's the plan. What are you thinking?"

"Schools in Boston, given Lilibeth is moving back for college."

"You guys are that serious?" Nicholas asked.

"Enough that I'm going to do that," Libby said.

I wondered, because she was bi, and wanted a long-term relationship with a guy and girl, while Lilibeth was as strongly lesbian as I was straight. I knew things could change, and Libby wasn't hurting herself in any way by going to school in Boston -- Harvard, MIT, and Boston College were all great schools, and those weren't the only ones in that area.

"Nicholas," Lilibeth said, "I know you're a Freshman, but do you know where you want to go?"

"UofC," he replied. "Pre-med and medical school, then I'll try to Match with the US Navy for my Residency."

"Not the Academy?"

"It's almost impossible to be a doctor that way," Nicholas said. "And there would be no guarantees. That works for Albert, who wants to be in the Navy no matter what, but I want to be a doctor no matter what."

"He wants to be a jet pilot, right?" Lilibeth asked.

"Yes. And he'll have his multi-engine pilot's license when he applies to Annapolis," I replied. "That's no guarantee he'd be selected for jet fighters, but he'll certainly have a leg up. And he's OK with flying anything."

I pulled into the parking lot near Johnny's Ice House, and five minutes later, Nicholas and I were in the locker room to dress for the game.

 Steve

"Need a date for the game?" Libby asked as she sat down beside me, close enough that our shoulders and hips touched.

"I think I'll survive without one," I chuckled.

"You said that last time! And I asked if you thought you'd survive a date with me!"

"That sounds like a challenge," Jennifer, who was sitting to my right, teased.

"Now *you're* being a troublemaker, Jen!" I retorted.

"As if *that's* new!" Josie, who was sitting to Jennifer's right, observed.

"True!" I agreed. "She's been like that since eighth grade!"

"That's when you guys met?" Libby asked.

"Yes," Jennifer replied, "though we had our serious ups and downs for a decade, mostly because I couldn't come to terms with my desire to be with girls."

"And society's stupid reaction to that as well," I added.

"I've seen that," Libby said. "But I don't think it's as bad as it was."

"It's not," Jennifer confirmed.

The horn sounded for the game to start.

"We need a quick score!" Josie declared.

"Me, too!" Libby teased, pressing her shoulder against mine.

"What's gotten into you?" I asked, repeating the line from the previous time.

"Nothing...yet! Want to?"

"You know the concern," I replied as the players took the ice.

Libby turned her head and spoke quietly.

"Jesse and I don't do that anymore," she said. "Interested in being wildly fucked by a seventeen-year-old girl?"

I probably should have expected her to ask at some point, though I'd felt her relationship with Jesse would prevent it. I was absolutely interested, but this was a question of *should I* not *did I want to*.

"Let's talk after the game," I said, temporizing.

Libby smiled and nodded and we sat down just as the puck dropped to begin the game.

LXI. What a Bunch of Fucking Assholes!

December 14, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"Prepare to be smoked!" Nicole declared when I skated out to warm up.

"I thought you and Mikey were exclusive!" I teased.

Nicole rolled her eyes, "You're toast, Block!"

"Bring it, Heath!" I challenged.

"Hi, Jesse!" Mikey declared, skating up to us.

"Hey, Mikey! Lunch after the game?"

"You're on!"

He and Nicole skated to their end, and I joined Pete to stretch.

"How long have they been dating?" Pete asked.

"A few years," I replied. "They're permanent, for sure. Hopefully, they'll go to UW Madison so we can hang out more."

"You were on the same team before High School, right?"

"For about five years. Mikey and I roomed together at tournaments."

"I think he has a better deal now!" Pete said with a grin.

"Yeah," I chuckled. "By a long shot!"

When we finished stretching, we took turns in net blocking shots that came fast and furious from our own teammates. The horn sounded, Pete collected the pucks, while everyone else skated to the bench. Coach gave us his usual pep talk and then both first lines took their positions, as the referee skated to center ice.

I wasn't surprised when Nicole skated to her wing position and pointed at the goal like Babe Ruth pointing to where he was going to hit a home run. I chuckled, but then steeled myself, because I knew she was going to bring everything she had. The puck dropped, Oak Park won the face-off and after a quick pass from Mikey, Nicole skated into our zone.

Freddie skated backwards in front of her, trying to poke away the puck. He played it perfectly, and she knew she had no shot, so she dumped the puck back to Mikey at the blue line. She skated towards me as he fired a shot from long range, obviously hoping for a rebound. I saw the puck the whole way and snagged it out of the air with my catching glove, for a face-off to my right.

We won the face off and managed to get the puck into their zone, but their tight D didn't give us a shot, and they tried to break out, though Mike poked the puck away from one of their wingers at center ice, and there was a scramble for the loose puck. Nicole got it, but simply fired it in because they wanted a line change. I stopped the puck, fired a long pass across the blue line to Tom who skated in against just a single defenseman. He got off a good shot, but the Oak Park goalie turned it away, and another scramble ensued in the corner.

We changed our D and Oak Park managed to clear the puck to center, with DeShawn gathering in the puck which allowed us to change our O while Oak

Park changed their D. It went that way, back and forth, up and down the ice, with a lot of time spent in the neutral zone, for the rest of the period. I stopped a total of four shots, and the Oak Park Goalie five, resulting in a 0-0 score at the end of the first period.

 Steve

"Oak Park is really trying hard to make our guys the Bears, not the Dolphins," Josie observed, referring to Miami having a perfect NFL season in '72 and the Bears coming up one game shy in '85.

"The Bears won more games than Miami," I countered.

"And yet..." Josie said.

"Our D is playing tough and Nicole hasn't had a shot," I observed. "Mikey has two."

"Jesse was psyched this morning," Libby said. "He really wants to stop Nicole."

"Of course!" Natalie exclaimed from behind me. "They've been blood enemies on the ice since they started High School!"

"Shouldn't you be sitting in the Oak Park section?" Jennifer asked with a smirk.

"Those rules are so dumb!" Natalie declared. "I can't cheer for my sister if I'm sitting here with all my friends. And I'd rather sit with all of you than my parents!"

"They put the rules in place because there were altercations," Josie interjected.

"Because hockey moms are NUTS!" I declared.

"There might be some truth to that," Jennifer said, laughing softly. "Josie is pretty intense!"

"Oh, please!" Josie protested. "You're every bit as intense!"

"Maybe," Jennifer allowed with a smile.

"We need to find a way to score!" Tom declared from the other side of Josie.

"You can score easily!" Libby whispered to me, knowing Bethany, sitting to Tom's right, would object to her comment.

"We'll talk," I replied quietly.

The horn sounded, and the kids came back on the ice. The second period was very much like the first -- a tough defensive struggle with neither team able to gain a serious advantage, and no penalties. There were a total of seven shots, with Jesse making three saves and the Oak Park goalie four, resulting in a 0-0 tie at the end of two periods.

 Jesse

"Men, we need to find a way to score," Coach Nelson declared. "Their D is playing us tough, just as ours is playing them tough. Dump-and-chase is not working for either side, and both sides are killing the passing lanes. We need to look for opportunities for break-out passes and take them, even if the passes are a bit riskier than usual. D men, you need to stay sharp, look for your forwards, and guard your ice! Let's get out there and take it to them!"

"RAH!" everyone shouted.

We hit the ice for the third period, ready to take it to Oak Park. We were both safely in the playoffs, and wouldn't meet in the first round, and likely not the second, unless they won. In a sense, it was to their advantage not to win, as they'd be in the bracket with the 2nd place team, which looked to be St. Rita, so long as they drew or beat Chicago Latin.

The game ultimately came down to a pair of penalties. We killed our penalty, but scored on theirs, with a Mitch scoring on a hard shot from the top of the circle to the goalie's right. We had to defend a six-on-five when Oak Park pulled their goalie with about seventy seconds left in the game, but Freddy blocked a shot by Nicole, and I saved a hard slapshot from her line-mate at the buzzer to seal the 1-0 win.

"You suck!" Nicole said when we bumped gloves.

"Never once in my life," I chuckled. "I doubt YOU can say that!"

She laughed and stuck her tongue out at me, which no coach could see because her back was to the bench and she was wearing the mandatory cage mask.

"See you in the playoffs, Jesse!" Mikey said as we bumped gloves. "We'll get you then!"

After the handshakes, which were always fist bumps as we weren't allowed to remove any gear while on the ice, we skated off the ice and went to the locker room for showers.

 Steve

Libby and I moved away from everyone else while we were waiting for the kids to come out of the locker room.

"What will it take to get a 'yes' to being wildly fucked by an enthusiastic teenage girl?" Libby asked with an inviting smile.

"Before I answer, I need to let you know that this weekend is basically booked solid because I have plans this afternoon and on Sunday we're all going to Matthew's concert, which is at 1:00pm, and next weekend I'll be in San Francisco."

"I've waited this long, so I think I can be patient! Are you saying 'yes'?"

"You understand my reluctance, right?"

"You're concerned about my relationship with Jesse. It's also the case you have access to ridiculous amounts of teenage pussy, so it's not special, at least in that regard."

"Your relationship with Jesse is the primary concern."

"But the second one is true, too! I'm not offended, obviously! Jesse has more action than any five guys I know!"

"Does Jesse know you're asking?" I asked.

"Yes. He and I aren't lovers and aren't likely to be. I want an arrangement like yours, with a girl and a guy; well, before you brought in Suzanne. Jesse doesn't want that."

"None of my kids do, at least as far as I'm aware."

"If the weekends are out, it could be a weekday after 2:45pm," Libby said.

"In case you haven't noticed, I haven't agreed!"

"In case you haven't noticed, you haven't said 'no!'"

I chuckled, "You appear to have benefitted from the Hangouts!"

"It's time to graduate! My first fuck with an actual adult, then Philosophy Club!"

"You're sure?"

"Seriously?" Libby asked, laughing softly. "Do teenage girls who offer to wildly fuck you not mean it?"

"I'm positive you mean it, what I'm asking is if you've considered the possible ramifications and are prepared to deal with them."

"Jesse doesn't care and we haven't been together in months and, as I said, won't be again. I'm seventeen, so the government won't care. I can't think of any downside. Well, unless you're concerned you'll disappoint me!"

"You never know! How about after I come back from San Francisco? Sometime during Christmas break?"

"Deal! I promise I won't disappoint!"

 Jesse

"We should hang out during Christmas break," Mikey said when he, Nicole, Zahra, and I were at lunch at Bacino's on Wacker after the game.

"Sure," I agreed. "I'll be in town the entire time, though we'll have visitors, including our Russian friends and my friend from Minnesota. Jerry and Mia will be in town, so they could hang out with us as well."

"Do you play any sports, Zahra?" Nicole asked.

"No. I stick to academics. I'm on the Debate Team and in the Young Scientists Club. But I'm at the Lab School, not at Kenwood Academy."

"She's Birgit's friend," I added.

"Jesse, you're still looking at UW Madison, right?" Mikey asked.

"Yes, but no plans to play for the NCAA team. I'll play for the club team. You two are still looking to play for an NCAA team, right?"

"Yes, but because of the dumb NCAA rules, we can't have any official discussions until recruitment begins, which is next year, when we're all Seniors. I bet you get attention from scouts."

I shrugged, "Maybe, given it's so difficult to make the NHL, I think focusing on my grades and playing club hockey is a wiser plan."

"I just want the money for school," Nicole said. "Otherwise I'll end up borrowing money, which I don't want to do. Mikey, on the other hand, wants to start for the Blackhawks!"

"What are you going to study?" Zahra asked.

"I'm actually considering research, similar to Jesse's Aunt Kara, but biochem instead of polymers. What about you?"

"Pre-med. I want to be a pediatrician."

"You're a Freshman, right?" Nicole asked.

"Yes. And you're both Juniors, right?"

"Yes."

"You're a couple, right?"

"For a few years. You guys are dating?"

"Yes, but we're not a couple. And I'm really only allowed to go out with the group, except for hockey games."

"Your parents are strict?"

"Not as bad as some, but Muslim parents are very, very conservative. Do you go to church?"

"We're both Catholic," Mikey replied. "But we're not too serious about it. Not as serious as Jesse is about his church, anyway."

We finished our lunches, Zahra and I said 'goodbye' to Mikey and Nicole, then headed back to the Compound.

 Birgit

"I had my test," Tomás said when I met him at the diner across from the hospital after his game.

He handed me the form which showed all negatives and I handed it back.

"Unfortunately, I have plans today and tomorrow," I said. "And I do have one important thing I have to tell you. The year after next, I'm going to Sweden for a

year, and I don't think it's wise to try to maintain a long-distance relationship, especially when I wouldn't see the person for a year."

"Does that mean you don't want to be my girlfriend?"

"It makes it complicated," I replied. "I can't really promise more than being friends with benefits, at least before my Senior year in High School."

"Are you saying that you'll fool around with me, but I'm still free to go out with other girls if I wanted to?"

"Yes, and I could go out with other guys. No jealousy. Maybe something comes of it, maybe it doesn't. But one thing is guaranteed."

"What's that?"

"You'll be a VERY happy boy!"

"When?" Tomás asked.

"How about next Saturday afternoon? You could even spend the night if you could find a way to swing it."

"I don't think that would work. If my parents ever found out, I'd be toast!"

"I understand. And some important information -- I'm on the Pill, so you don't need rubbers."

"Better and better!" Tomás declared. "What time?"

"It would be after my afternoon karate class, so about 2:30pm? You could stay as late as you're allowed, and if it's past curfew, someone would drive you home."

"I have to be home by 11:00pm anyway."

"OK. Nine hours should be enough!"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"Maggie seemed really weird last night," Chelsea observed as we walked along the sidewalk in our subdivision.

"You know the issue," I said. "And there's no resolution I can think of. Well, no acceptable resolution. Honestly, I don't think there's anything to do at this point except not hang out with her. It sucks, but tell me another solution? She's totally fixated on something that can never, ever happen."

"I'm concerned she might become depressed because what she desires is futile."

"And this is where I say 'resistance is futile?' I smirked.

"Except that contradicts what you've been saying!"

"Duh," I chuckled. "It was meant to be goofy. But you're right about the risk of depression. I wonder if we should say something to her parents?"

"Maybe say something to your mom or Eduardo, and let one of them, or both, speak to Maggie's parents."

"That probably makes sense," I agreed. "Did you finalize the plans for Ohio for after Christmas?"

"Yes. We'll drive down on the 27th, so that we can spend Boxing Day at your Dad's house so you can see all the grandparents. We'll get together with Pavel and Larisa that evening, then spend the next day with the same gang who went to the zoo. On the 29th, we'll get together with my friends from High School, then drive back on the 30th so we can go to the party Josh and Arby have planned."

"Sounds good to me!"

"I saw on your mom's calendar that tomorrow is your dad's anniversary."

"Yes, but Mom said that they're actually celebrating the trio on the day they married Suzanne, July 7th. And Aunt Jessica won't be with us tonight because she had to work. That's why she was at the concert on Thursday night."

"That entire setup is very strange!" Chelsea declared.

"Stranger than my cousin, who was almost four years older, declaring she was going to marry me when I was five?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Cool apartment!" Tiffany exclaimed when we walked into Rachel's apartment near UofC about 3:00pm.

"I think so!" Rachel declared. "I was really happy that Samantha allowed me to move in this month."

"But the condo was so sweet!" Hannah protested.

"Two little kids basically cramped my style!" Rachel declared. "Don't get me wrong, I love Benjamin and Megan, but I am SO not ready to have kids, and they were always underfoot."

"When does Javon move in?" Naomi asked.

"After Christmas. His parents will totally object, so he wants to keep the family peace during the holidays."

"They don't object to him dating you, right?" I asked.

"No, but they will object to us living together without being married. I'm not ready to get married, either."

"Duh!" Hannah declared. "You're only eighteen!"

"Actually, not until January 10th," Rachel countered. "But close enough."

"And you start at UofC in January, right?" Fangsu asked.

"Yes. I'm basically taking all electives, as the Freshman courses I need start in the Fall. I'll have Birgit's mom for chemistry, and maybe your dad for math."

"Maybe," Fangsu replied. "He does teach Introduction to Calculus."

"What are we doing today?" Laurie asked.

"Pizza, music, and games," Rachel declared.

"Sounds great!" I exclaimed.

 Jesse

"The friend from Minnesota who is visiting is the girl who visited before, right?"
Zahra asked as we got out of bed.

"Yes."

"And she's going to sleep in your bed with you?"

"Probably."

"I wish that was me," Zahra said as we got into the shower. "But there's no way I could. She's in college, right?"

"Yes. Are you bothered by that?"

"No. I knew the score before we went to bed together. You won't convert to Islam, and I can't leave my faith, so all we can be is lovers. And I don't want to stop!"

"Me, either!"

"I am jealous, but only because she can sleep in your bed with you. Someday I want to do that, but I don't know if it would ever be possible."

"Don't take any risks, please."

"No way! I don't want to have to stop!"

We showered, dried ourselves, then dressed. We went out of the coach house, got into Aunt Jessica's BMW, and I drove Zahra home before heading to Oak Park for my date with Missy.

 Steve

"How are things going?" I asked Danielle when she got into my BMW at Trinity.

"I was politely invited to leave Trinity at the end of the semester," she said as I pulled away from the curb.

"On what possible grounds?"

"I was disfellowshipped by my church for moral failings. Trinity has a morals clause, and Pastor Dwight contacted them. I told them you can't kick someone out who has already quit!"

"Does that cause problems for you now or in the future?"

"Nobody is supposed to associate with me, but Talia doesn't care, and this coming week is exam week, so no big deal. I move in with Tabitha and John on the 23rd. We'll celebrate Christmas together. Is it OK if I come to the New Year's party?"

"Absolutely."

"I might have a date, if that's OK."

"It is. Mind if I ask who?"

"A guy who works with John at TTX. It's a blind date, but I figured a large party would be perfect."

"What does he do at TTX?" I asked.

"I could make a joke about 'dad' or 'big brother' but given what we're about to do, I'm not sure that would be a good idea!"

"Mentor with significant life experience?"

"Much better! Anyway, he's Deputy Operations Manager. The only other thing I know about him is that he's thirty-two and just under six feet tall. But John says he's a really nice guy."

"I agree bringing him to the party is a safe way to meet."

"Can I ask why you didn't get in touch with Nadia?"

"Mainly because I was out of town and I've been busy. To be honest, I wasn't sure, but Kara is curious about the 'dark dreams' and encouraged me to."

"I think she should tell you," Danielle said. "But she's really hoping you'll message her. Black hair, short, thin but not skinny, and twenty years old."

"Is this important to you?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say it's important," Danielle said, "but I would appreciate it. I suppose you could call it a favor."

"Favors are the currency in my close relationships," I said.

"Is this where you say that some day, and that day may never come, you will call upon me to do a service for you?" she asked with a smile.

I laughed, "You're going to fit right in at the Compound."

"Honestly, I think Tabitha and I made the right decision to continue the relationship beyond just having our brains fucked out during an amazing first time. I think you can teach us a lot, and we certainly have a lot to learn about life. But that starts AFTER we spend the next fifteen hours fucking, sucking, and anything else you want to do!"

"I believe I can accommodate!" I replied. "As for the favor, is Nadia a friend from church or school?"

"She lives a few houses down the street and we went to the same High School, but she doesn't go to church. She did growing up, but not the same one. She stopped going when she was about sixteen. She received an associate's degree and is working as a combination secretary and paralegal for a lawyer in DeKalb. Will you contact her?"

"Probably, though it'll be sometime later in the week. As for today, did you have something specific in mind?"

"The sauna and whirlpool bath would be fun. And Kara could watch, if she wanted to."

"You'll make her day!" I chuckled.

 Jesse

"Dad, this is Jesse Block," Missy said when she led me into the front room at her dad's house.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Underhill," I said, extending my hand.

We shook hands.

"Nice to meet you, Jesse," Mr. Underhill said. "Missy says you're the star goalie of the Kenwood Academy hockey team and you went undefeated!"

"We did," I replied. "I plan to take Missy to dinner, then we'll see *Treasure Planet* and I'll have her home before 11:00pm."

"I won't be here, Missy," her dad said, "but I expect you to be home on time."

"Jesse just said he'd bring me home before curfew!" Missy protested.

"I was just reminding you," he said. "Have fun, you two!"

We left the house and got into my car for the relatively short drive to the theatre. The diner was just a block away, so it was easiest to simply park in the theatre lot.

"See what I have to put up with?" Missy grouched as I backed out of the short driveway.

"I guess I don't see him reminding you to be home on time to be a big deal."

"Even after you promised?"

"Of all the problems you could have with your dad, being reminded of things is a pretty good one. He didn't give me the third degree, so that's a win!"

"I guess," Missy allowed. "I bet he won't be home until after midnight..."

"And that is a risk you should not take! You can come to my house on Monday with zero risk. Going back to what your dad said, you'd look better to him if you simply acknowledged what he said without protesting."

"Seriously?"

"Your goal is to have him trust you and allow you to do what you want to do, right? Not objecting to him reminding you of the rules is a way to do that; the more you protest, the more suspicious he'll be that you want to do things he doesn't want you to do."

"He's already suspicious!"

"Which is pretty typical for the dad of a teenage girl! But I disarmed him somewhat by leading with having you home in time. If he trusts me, we'll be able to do more and, from time to time, ask for an exception to your curfew. One thing I've learned is that if I manage parents correctly and respect them, they trust me, and that means more freedom."

"You've never fought with your moms or your dad?"

"Never. They gave me responsibility to manage my own life, and by not abusing it, I have almost complete freedom."

"What would get you in trouble?"

"Drinking and driving, unsafe sex, or breaking the law."

"Besides sex?"

"Until I'm eighteen, it's a gray area, and nobody is going to prosecute in Illinois. That said, laws which purport to control what we willingly and consensually do with our own bodies are generally unjust -- restrictions on sodomy, abortion, and consensual sex being perfect examples. Drugs, too, though they're a trickier problem, because we do want someone ensuring the efficacy and quality of drugs."

"Sodomy?"

"Mostly it means gay sex, but in some places, it's illegal for a guy to go down on a girl, even if they're married."

"Oh, come on! Seriously?"

"Seriously! There are places in the US where dildos and vibrators are illegal."

"OK, now that's just dumb!"

"The number of dumb laws is almost endless!" I said as I pulled into a parking spot.

Once I parked, we got out and walked to the diner.



December 15, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"I very much enjoyed our time together," I said to Danielle as we dressed late on Sunday morning.

"Me, too!"

"And you totally made Kara's day by letting her watch AND then you watching us!"

"Even though I wanted to be very, very bad, I had NO clue about voyeurism or exhibitionism, and I would never have thought about how exciting they were! Can I ask you what the craziest thing you've done is?"

"You can ask!" I replied. "And I'll even answer. I think it depends on how you define crazy. I joined the Mile-High Club when I was seventeen on a full-to-capacity 747. And not in a lavatory."

"In the cabin?"

"Yes, covered with blankets during the movie. I'd say sex with multiple partners as a teenager, but given how my life turned out, that's not really crazy."

"A threesome? At what age?"

"A foursome, actually, at fifteen."

"That would be crazy for most people, but that's your relationship now. It's interesting."

"Interesting as in you're interested in doing it, or interesting as in how it came about?"

"Both, actually."

"Which configuration? You with two guys? A guy and a girl? Two girls?"

"Two guys sounds like it might be fun; I don't know if I could do anything with a girl."

"As with anything to do with sex, it's not everyone's cup of tea. You do what you want to do, what feels good, and what makes your partner feel good. The

controlling words there are 'want to'. It's one of those things you need to be sure about, because it can have some seriously negative effects. On the flip side, a single experiment is not uncommon. But decide before you get into a situation because the 'heat of the moment' can cause all manner of bad decisions and is the leading cause of teen pregnancy!"

Danielle laughed, "I bet! I'm positive that's what happened with one girl at my old church last year."

"It's very easy to get carried away because sexual desire is a strong driver."

"TELL me about it!" Danielle declared. "That's what led me to agree to Kara watching the first time. For some reason, the idea made me so hot I couldn't stand it."

"And for some people, it's a complete turn off. Shall we get something to eat? We'll need to leave in about thirty minutes so we can drop you at Trinity."

"You'll let me know when the next Philosophy Club meeting it?"

"It'll be January 12th. Tabitha and John are planning to attend, so you could just come with them."

"Awesome."

"There might be an impromptu rap session on New Year's Eve, sometime in the afternoon."

"Open to anyone?"

"Anyone who is here. A friend from Hawai'i will be here and asked if I'd have one."

"Another girl like me?"

"She actually conformed more to the usual pattern -- a mindfuck leading to a physical fuck. She's bringing her boyfriend."

"Tabitha, Hope, me, and the other girls who you initiated should have a conversation! It would be interesting and enlightening!"

"I won't object, but you have to be careful given boyfriends might not be aware."

"I will be. Let's eat!"

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Michael

"Dad has tickets for the Bears against the Bucs on the 29th," Andi said as we waited for the kickoff of the Bears game against the Jets. "Do you want to go along?"

"Sure!" I agreed. "It'll be at UofI like the rest of the games this season?"

"Yes. We'll leave around 6:00am so that we can be sure to get to our seats by kickoff."

"Cool. I'll let Mom know."

"It's so cool you don't have to ask and can decide for yourself! I don't know anybody else in our grade who can do that!"

"My parents are different," I said.

"No kidding! How do you think we'll do in the robotics competition next Saturday?"

"We have a good chance, but Aurora East will be tough because of all the Navy guys who assist them. There's a Machinist's Mate who is a non-faculty advisor, and that really gives them an advantage."

"I don't think it's fair!"

"We had our own non-faculty advisor who works for a machine tool company," I countered.

"Yeah, but their guy has so much more knowledge and experience."

"So we just have to work harder! And our robot is great. It'll come down to how well we control it and whether we have mechanical problems. We've worked hard to make sure we don't."

"Michael?" Mom said, coming into the family room. "Don't forget everyone will be here about 3:00pm."

"I remember, Mom," I said. "The game should be done well before then."

"OK. Eduardo and I are going to the concert with your dad."

"We promise not to burn down the house or anything," I replied as they played the National Anthem.

"I don't think that was at the top of my list of concerns," Mom said.

She left the room.

"Talk about 'not normal' for parents!" Andi said. "I still can't believe they've never said a word about us being alone together."

"Right, because they don't allow Matthew and Chelsea to sleep together in his room!"

"Is that an invitation?" she asked sweetly.

"Let's watch the game, please," I suggested.

She was constantly dropping hints, but it seemed like that would complicate things. She was my best friend, and I didn't want to mess that up. I knew she wanted to be my girlfriend, but I wasn't ready to have a girlfriend, let alone kiss or anything.

Surprisingly, the game went well for the Bears who had lost ten of their thirteen games so far, including a streak of eight straight losses. At the end of the first half, the Bears were up 10-0, and it looked as if they were going to win. I got snacks for Andi and I, then settled back on the couch for the second half.

 Steve

"Excellent job, Matthew!" I said when we arrived at Elyse's house after the concert.

"Thanks, Dad!"

"*Fiddler on the Roof* is next, right?"

"Yes. Tryouts are in January."

"Are you going to try for the part of Tevye?"

"Of course! I have a good shot at getting it, but it's not a lock. There are way more parts for girls because Tevye has a wife and five daughters."

"Your future with Chelsea?" I asked.

Matthew laughed, "Kids, yes, but I think I could do without five daughters! I have three sisters and that's MORE than enough!"

"You've always got along well with them," I said.

"Which does not make Birgit any less annoying!"

"I HEARD THAT!" Brigit declared from the other room.

"YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO!" Matthew called back.

"Taking lessons from Jesse?" I asked.

"It's so easy to yank her chain! You do it!"

"Yes, I do. What's up with Maggie?"

"Why do you ask?"

"She didn't seem herself when she said 'hello' and walked away as soon as you and Chelsea came over to us."

"Let's step into Eduardo's study, OK?"

I nodded and followed him through the double doors of the study and shut them behind us.

"She's in love with me and wants me to break up with Chelsea," Matthew said.

"And a trio is definitely not in the cards," I said.

"Nothing personal, Dad, but that's not what I want."

"I didn't take offense," I replied. "You and Chelsea are happy with how things are and that's all that matters. If you're happy, I'm happy. I'll be happier with grandkids, but that's pretty far in the future."

"You think?" Matthew asked, rolling his eyes.

"I'm not sure what you can do except be firm with her."

"I have. It hasn't changed anything, and Chelsea and I are concerned she'll become depressed. I mentioned that to Mom and she's going to speak to Maggie's mom."

"Good. Depression can be very dangerous, and I don't think there's anything you can do at this point except continue to be firm."

"My big concern is that she often gets the leading female role, and it was the on-stage kisses that made her consider...violating her conscience."

"Your kisses are THAT good?" I teased.

"Chelsea seems to think so!" Matthew declared.

"And that's all that matters. I'm not sure what to tell you on that. I don't think you should ask Mr. Fruits to change who he chooses for lead roles, and I know you don't want to give up your leads."

"No, I don't. I will tell Mr. Fruits that serious kisses aren't going to work, but neither *Fiddler* or *The Crucible* has any love scenes that would call for serious kisses."

"I remember your first kiss being on stage!"

"Not a *real* kiss, but that's true."

"And you certainly changed your mind about it after that!"

"Possibly," Matthew replied with a grin.

There was a knock at the door and I opened it.

"Could I get some help in the kitchen, please?" Elyse requested.

"I think we're done, right Matthew?"

"Yes."

We left Eduardo's study, and I followed Elyse to the kitchen.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Hmm..." she smirked.

"It's been years," I replied. "And you know I've always left that decision to you."

"I was actually teasing. It's just...we're in a very different place, I guess."

"You and me? You and Eduardo?"

"Both, I think," Elyse replied. "Would you make the salad, please? Everything is in the fridge."

I moved to the fridge and gathered the things I needed on the counter, then got a cutting board and a knife.

"I'm not actually surprised," I replied. "You always wanted a simple, suburban life, and you've achieved that goal. Eduardo makes you happy, and he's very happy to come home to the simple, suburban life after his lengthy trips to South America. My complicated life, and the city, were never your thing, and that hasn't changed in the twenty-three years we've known each other."

"True. I assume your private conversation with Matthew was about Maggie?"

"Yes. I don't have a solution for him, given his desire to be monogamous. And I don't see him requesting, or Chelsea granting, a 'hall pass' to be with Maggie."

"No chance. She wants Matthew as her boyfriend. I'm having coffee with her mom tomorrow evening because Matthew expressed a concern about her being depressed."

"He said that to me, too. That's a wise move. Changing kids, how serious are Michael and Andi?"

Elyse laughed, "She's serious, he's only interested in being friends."

"He's thirteen, so I suspect that'll change soon enough."

"Probably."

"Salad is ready to go."

"Just put it in the fridge, please."

"Will do!"

We had a very nice family meal, and after dinner, Kara, Suzanne, Natalie, Yuriko, the kids, and I all headed back to the Compound.



December 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Steve, Stephanie needs you right away," Kimmy said over the intercom.

"I'll be right there," I said,

I got up and walked through the «yōshitsu» room, out the door, down the corridor.

"Go right in," Bobby Ellsworth said.

I opened the door and stepped into Stephanie's office where I saw Liz sitting on the sofa.

"Why did I suddenly feel chills run up my spine?" I asked.

"Close the door, please," Stephanie requested.

I did as she asked and went to sit next to Liz. Stephanie pushed a button on her phone.

"Jamie, Ned, Steve is with us now. Go ahead."

"Hi, Steve," Jamie said. "I just informed your sister that we were served with a lawsuit by Cole, Nichols, and Smith in California for negligence, breach of contract, and about a dozen other claims."

"Shit," I swore. "The server crash, right?"

"Yes. I've read through the claims, and they blame NIKA for the loss of their data and the lack of backups."

"That has no legs, Jamie," I replied. "You know what the contracts say."

"Of course. But that doesn't prevent them from suing."

"Which courts?"

"California, using California law."

"They signed a contract agreeing to Illinois law," I replied.

"Again, of course, but choice of law clauses are open to challenge based on consumer protection statutes, among other things."

"Son of a bitch. What's the plan?"

"We need to go through the claims line by line before I give you a solid answer. The question your sister couldn't answer is whether you're interested in a settlement or going to the mattresses."

"I think I'll wait for an analysis from you as well as an opinion from Liz. And I'll advise Stephanie, but she'll make the ultimate decision. Out of curiosity, can we remove to Federal court?"

"Maybe. They're a California firm, and you do have a presence in California, so it would be the 9th Circuit if we were successful. And it would still turn on California law, if the court finds that the relevant California statutes apply."

"You're just full of good news. When do you expect to have your analysis complete?"

"Give us until Friday. We have thirty days to respond. Liz will receive a copy of the complaint by courier before the end of the day. I know I don't have to remind you not to engage in any self-help, but as your attorney, I have to remind you!"

I chuckled, "I know. And what self-help? They didn't do any backups, and the server crashed. We'll rebuild the server for them, because we're contractually obligated to do that. What remedy do they demand?"

"Monetary damages in the seven-figure range."

"Wonderful. OK. I'll wait to hear from you and Liz."

"Steve," Ned said, "I'll put every necessary resource on this."

"Thanks, Ned. How is Pittsburgh?"

"It's a great city! You should visit for a Pens game!"

"I'll see what I can do and let you know. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"We'll be in touch," Jamie said.

Stephanie thanked them and disconnected the call.

"What's your take?" Stephanie asked.

"First reaction? Fuck 'em! They can't blame us for their own negligence. That said, nobody knows what a jury will do, so we have to be pragmatic about it. When will the server be rebuilt?"

"John is talking to them but they're being difficult. I asked him to document the conversations in detail."

"Good idea."

"There's a document preservation order," Liz said. "Those are automatic in a case like this."

"OK. Make sure everyone knows."

"Will do," Liz agreed.

"I'll put a memo out later today," Stephanie said. "After Liz has vetted it."

"I'm going back to my desk," I said. "Let me know."

"Of course," Stephanie agreed.

I got up and left her office. Things had been going too well recently, so it was high time for Loki to throw a monkey wrench into the works. Unfortunately, it was one that could cost us millions if things went completely sideways.

"Bad?" Penney asked.

"Very," I replied. "You'll see a memo from Stephanie later today. The short version is that Cole, Nichols, and Smith are suing us because they didn't do their backups."

"What a bunch of fucking assholes!" Penny growled

That did sum it up nicely.

"Let's get back to work," I said. "Jamie and Liz have it under control and we have a design document due by the end of the week."

"I know how you can work off your frustration!" Penny smirked.

"Kara, Jessica, and Suzanne know, too!" I replied.

"You're just no fun, Steve!" Penny grouched.

I kissed her cheek, she smiled, and we got back to work

LXII. Are You a Cult Leader?

December 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

Late on Monday afternoon, I decided that I would contact Danielle's friend, Nadia. I'd discussed it again with Kara, who, unsurprisingly, encouraged me, as she was curious as to what the 'dark dreams' might be. I had pointed out that 'curiosity killed the cat', and she'd simply laughed and said there was pussy involved, but not the feline kind!

NIKASteve: It's the Big Bad Wolf. Little Red Riding Hood suggested I contact you. DarkDreams82: I'm Nadia! I'm guessing your name is 'Steve' from your ID?

NIKASteve: It is.

DarkDreams82: How much did Danielle tell you?

NIKASteve: Just a basic physical description, your name, and your age. She demurred on your specific desire.

DarkDreams82: Could we meet face-to-face to talk?

NIKASteve: We could. Where?

DarkDreams82: Somewhere between Chicago and DeKalb? Maybe Spaghetti Warehouse on Ogden near the Fox Valley Mall?

NIKASteve: I know it. I could do that, but it'll have to be after my trip to San Francisco. I'm leaving Wednesday afternoon and I'll be back on Sunday evening.

DarkDreams82: Next week is Christmas. 😞

NIKASteve: I could meet on Monday evening to talk, if that worked.

DarkDreams82: The 23rd? How about 6:30pm?

NIKASteve: That works.

DarkDreams82: Then I'll see you there! Looking forward to it!

NIKASteve: Me, too!

DarkDreams82: Dream about me! I'll dream about you! Later!
NIKASteve: Later!

I minimized the chat window, and got back to work.

 Jesse

"Happy birthday, Mom!" I said when I put dinner on the table on Monday evening.

"Happy birthday, Jen!" Mom Two said.

"Thanks!" Mom One replied.

"Ashley made cakes," I said. "We'll go over to the main house for dessert and gifts, but I know you wanted a quiet dinner with Mom Two tonight!"

"I requested no gifts," Mom One said.

"My gift is spending the night in Albert's room, so you have the house to yourself," I said. "And you know Dad, he can't let your birthday go without a gift."

"How does it feel to be forty, Jen?" Mom Two asked.

"Turning forty doesn't make me feel old," Mom One said with a smile. "Having a sixteen-year-old son makes me feel old!"

"It could be worse," I said with a smirk. "You could be Birgit's mom!"

Mom One and Mom Two both laughed.

"I thought you two were getting along," Mom Two interjected.

"Oh, we are," I agreed, "but that doesn't make her any less challenging!"

"That was your Aunt Melanie," Mom One said. "Your dad learned his parenting style mostly from her parents."

"Grandma and Grandpa Block were pretty cool, though, right? I mean, didn't Dad stay over?"

"Yes, but they weren't nearly as open-minded as Melanie's parents."

"Jonathan sure doesn't think his parents are mellow!"

"Pete tempered Melanie's wild streak; he's always been more conservative and straitlaced. He and your Aunt Kathy kept your dad and Melanie from getting into more trouble than they did, though with Aunt Kathy it was after they both came to Chicago."

"You were at Stanford then, right?" I asked.

"Yes, but before I met Mom Two."

We ate our dinner, then the three of us went to the main house for dessert and a gift from Dad to Mom One, which was really a gift for both of them -- an all-expenses-paid Caribbean cruise which they could schedule for anytime during 2003.

"What part of 'no gifts' did you not understand?" Mom One asked Dad.

"When's the last time Snuggle Bear did ANYTHING you said?" Aunt Kara teased.

"Point taken!" Mom One declared.

"This is where you say 'thank you', Jen," Mom Two prompted.

"Steve knows I'm grateful," Mom One said. "And he also knows he's annoying!"

"TELL me about it!" Birgit declared, causing everyone to laugh.

When we finished our cake and ice cream, my moms went back to our house, and I went up to Albert's room with him to play video games until it was time for bed.



December 17, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Steve

"Let me get this straight," I said to Liz when she came to my office on Tuesday afternoon. "Cole, Nichols, and Smith failed to get an internet connection for the server, failed to change tapes on a daily basis, ignored the daily warnings on the console for three days, ignored the warnings on EVERY sign-on screen for ten days, had disconnected the modem line, had the server in a closet with no cooling despite being told not to, and it's OUR fault?"

"That is their claim," Liz said. "Obviously, they didn't cite any of those items in their claims, and those will be part of our reply brief, but their contention is, in effect, we should have known they were non-technical and wouldn't understand anything we told them."

"Our end-user maintenance documentation is written in clear English, with step-by-step instructions," I said. "Why do I feel as if this is like the warnings on

ladders or the ones on blow dryers about not using them in the bathtub or shower?"

"It's not, and I bet you know why," Liz countered.

I sighed, "Because if they admit fault, it's going to look bad for their clients and likely open them up to lawsuits. Do we know what they have in the way of paper files?"

"No, but the problem is likely related to work in progress, especially briefs. I suspect they'll miss deadlines."

"And they want to be able to tell the judges that it's our fault when they ask for extra time and continuances. Tell me your take."

"Well, all they need from us is an admission of responsibility. I suspect that and a small sum in settlement so they can claim victory and put the blame on us would do."

"And trash our reputation," I countered. "Not to be obtuse, but what is their theory for not even calling us when they received a message on every login screen in red saying to call us immediately?"

"We won't know until we get there. There are disputed facts, so neither side can win on summary judgment, nor can we obtain a dismissal for failure to state a claim. In the end, it's a contract suit with questions about our disclaimers of warranty and liability."

"And ours are mild compared to, say, Microsoft. We actually commit to fixing bugs in a timely fashion and provide business continuity and recovery services, which, of course, Cole, Nichols, and Smith did not contract for and are not

paying for. I know the answer to my next question, but I'm going to ask it anyway -- how do we prevent this in the future?"

"You know full well there is no way to prevent someone from suing you except through mandatory arbitration clauses, and you've ruled those out."

"And I wouldn't reconsider, but that's up to my sister."

"She won't," Liz replied, "because it's part of the «kami» that we don't do anything to disadvantage our clients. Nobody is going to change that. In any event, I'll work with Jamie on the response, with input from John and his team. Do you want to see the reply brief before it's filed?"

"Yes, though obviously I'll defer to your judgment."

"Obviously?" Liz asked with an arched eyebrow.

"OK, maybe not," I chuckled. "What day is our filing due?"

"January 21st. We get a few extra days because of Christmas and New Year's."

"I'll be in California tomorrow through Sunday. What would you say to me speaking to someone at Cole, Nichols, and Smith while I'm there?"

"Unwise. An informal conversation could create trouble for us. A formal conversation, with counsel present, would be appropriate, but I know that's not what you meant."

"No, it's not. I'll let it go. After all, I'm a software engineer! It just seems as if every time I turn around, Loki is throwing some obstacle in my way."

"Have a nice trip to California. San Francisco, right?"

"Yes."

Liz left, and I went back to work, making my final suggestions for the design document for the next major release of our medical software. About ten minutes later, the intercom buzzed.

"Steve, I have Hisataka Fujikawa on the line for you."

"Thanks!" I exclaimed, knowing what that meant.

The phone buzzed, and I picked up the handset.

"Good afternoon, Hisataka-san!" I said.

"Good afternoon, Steve-san! We have a baby boy, who we will name Kenji."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks! Miyu is tired, but otherwise fine and in good spirits, and Kenji is healthy!"

"Very good news! When you and Miyu-chan are up to it, please come by the house. I'm sure my daughters would love to spoil yet another baby!"

"Thank you! We'll see you soon."

"Give my best to Miyu-chan, please."

"I will."

We said 'goodbye' and I replaced the handset in the cradle. I made a note to find a gift for Kenji when I was in San Francisco, as I wouldn't have time to do it before I left.



December 18, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

"I don't believe I've ever had a chauffeuse," I said to the young woman driving the black Lincoln Town Car very late Wednesday morning.

"I'm sorry, sir, a what?"

"A 'chauffeuse' is a female chauffeur."

"Are you an English professor or teacher?"

"No, I'm a software engineer. I founded a computer consulting and software company with my friends right out of college about seventeen-and-a-half years ago."

"You don't look forty!"

"Thanks. Mind if I ask how old you are?"

"Twenty-two. I'm Raven, by the way."

"Steve. Do you drive full-time?"

"Yes. My dad owns the company, and he started as a driver, so this is where he thinks I should start."

"That actually makes a lot of sense," I observed. "You'll learn everything you need to know about the business this way. You can hire people to keep the books and hire legal counsel to handle contracts, and so on, but really running the business means understanding what your employees do and who your customers are."

"You sound a lot like my dad! Was your dad into computers?"

"No. He has a degree in electrical engineering, served in the Navy, and worked for government agencies."

"Covert?"

"Yes. Then he went into business for himself. I wasn't interested in taking over the businesses because I was really into computers."

"Most of my passengers are computer guys from one Silicon Valley firm or another, or visiting one of those firms. Are you here for meetings?"

"No. A bit of R&R in one of my favorite cities to visit, and meeting a friend from Hawai'i. We do have several employees based in the Bay Area, but our satellite office is in LA. Our Western Region office is in Colorado Springs."

"What kind of software do you write?"

"Software for law firms and medical practices; we also do custom programming and provide consulting and computer systems and network support. We have clients all over the US, and a sister firm in Moscow that covers Europe."

"Where's home?"

"Chicago, though I'm originally from the LA area. My family moved to the Midwest in the early 70s."

"Do we have your return trip?" Raven asked.

"Yes. Sunday at 10:00am for a 1:00pm flight."

"Have any big plans for the next four days?"

"A bit of sightseeing, some shopping, meals, and a drive along the coast."

"Sounds like fun! OK to ask if it's a guy friend or a romantic friend?"

"You realize those might not be mutually exclusive, right?"

Raven laughed, "Sorry. It just seemed as if you were straight."

"I *am* straight! I was just pointing out the fallacy of your question."

"You were just messing with my head?"

"I was. I do that fairly often."

"So, a real smart ass?"

"Yes, but it's deeper than that."

"Deep is good!" Raven declared.

"Speaking of being a smart ass!" I chuckled.

"I usually play it totally serious, but you seem cool and not uptight."

"Life is too short to be uptight."

"On a serious note, you'll be early for check-in at the Mark Hopkins."

"I'm a member of their Six Continents Club, which provides early check-in and late check-out, in addition to an upgrade to a suite."

"Nice! What time is your friend arriving?"

"About 5:00pm," I replied.

Keiki had her campus visit at Stanford, and a car arranged by Scott Bannerman would bring her from campus to the hotel. I had considered renting a car, but it wasn't really worth it for just a round trip from the hotel to campus and back.

"If you aren't doing anything for lunch, I could take my break," Raven offered.

"Are you always this forward with clients?" I asked with a smile I was sure she could see in her rearview mirror.

"No, and actually it's against company policy, but being the owner's daughter gives me some leeway. What do you say?"

Raven was tanned, had reddish-brown hair, and was cute, though not pretty, and she wasn't a typical 'Steve type'. I had no specific plans before Keiki arrived, and lunch was a good way to kill some time.

"That sounds good," I replied. "Where?"

"What do you like to eat?" Raven asked.

"I'm open to anything, though I have to watch my carb intake. Oriental of any kind is fine, I just skip the rice."

"Diabetic?"

"No, just weird metabolism."

"What happens, if it's OK to ask?" Raven inquired.

"The main symptom is syncope, that is, light-headedness and passing out."

"Isn't that usually from low blood sugar?"

"With normal metabolism, I would agree. With mine, not so much. I see a team of experts at Mayo, but they haven't figured it out. The theory is it's something with my hypothalamus, but it's not a tumor, so there isn't a treatment. I take a fast-acting beta-blocker if I feel the effects of the carbs, which manifest as a manic feeling before the syncope."

"You should see someone at Stanford."

"My doctor at Mayo has consulted with Stanford, as well as Johns Hopkins and Karolinska in Sweden. Other doctors have looked at it as well, including at the University of Chicago, and a family friend who's a doctor in Ohio. But, so long as I watch my carb intake, there are no problems."

"How about Chinese? There are several places close to the Mark Hopkins."

"Sounds good to me. What about the car?"

"I know the Bellman at the Mark Hopkins; he'll let me park it in their parking court for an hour."

We chatted for the rest of the drive and I learned she had two younger brothers, one who was at UCLA studying computers and a younger one who was a starting quarterback for his High School team, who was being recruited by several NCAA schools. Her mom kept the books for her dad, and also did dispatch, and they'd met when he'd picked her up in his car twenty-two years previously.

"So, following your mom and dad?" I asked.

Raven laughed, "To do that, we'd have to skip lunch!"

"That sounds like an interesting story."

"Mom was eighteen and coming back from a Summer in Europe. Dad picked her up at the airport, she flirted, and when they arrived at her house, she invited him in. I arrived nine months later."

"When did they marry?"

"When they found out she was pregnant, they went to Vegas and got hitched. Her parents were pretty upset, though they're cool now."

"Unwed pregnant daughters tend to create a bit of tension at home. But from my perspective, they've been married, ostensibly happily, for going on twenty-three years, which says it was the right thing to do."

"And if that had been your daughter? Well, if you had a daughter."

"Things happen," I replied. "You can get pregnant with even perfect use of birth control. The key is understanding that and taking responsibility for your actions and acting honorably."

"Nobody is THAT cool."

"I am. I have kids, and my three eldest are allowed to have their paramours sleep over."

"I call BS!" Raven declared as she turned onto California Street.

"It's true. My three eldest are two boys and a girl, in that order. All of them have overnight guests."

"I still don't believe it. Wait! Three eldest? How many kids do you have?"

"Seven," I replied. "By four women."

"Four marriages?"

"One, but it's complicated."

"It would have to be! Mind telling me?"

"If I did mind, I wouldn't have volunteered the information! My eldest is by my High School girlfriend who eventually figured out she was a lesbian. I also have two boys with another High School girlfriend. If that's not complicated enough, I'm in a polygamous marriage and have two kids each by my senior wife and my legal wife. There's a third wife as well, but she doesn't have kids and doesn't want any of her own."

"Holy crap!" Raven exclaimed.

"And to top it off, I also have a pair of girlfriends who live in my house."

Raven started laughing hysterically, "OK, I was buying it until that last bit!"

A few seconds later, she pulled into the parking court and pulled into a spot marked 'RESERVED: Car Service'.

"I can show you pictures," I said.

I slipped my wallet from my pocket and pulled out the photo insert and handed it over the back of the seat to Raven.

"The first picture is the entire clan -- seven kids, three wives, two other mothers, and two girlfriends."

"No way!" Raven protested. "Just no way!"

"Completely true."

"Are you a cult leader?"

"Do you think I'd answer with a 'yes' if I were?" I asked with a smirk.

"Good point!" Raven declared. "So?"

"It has been said about me by others, but no, I'm not a cult leader. I don't hold any specific religious or spiritual views, and everyone has the freedom to act in their own best interests, though everyone always takes into account what's best for the extended family. In the end, though, each person, down to my youngest daughter, who's eleven, decides for themselves."

"Crazy!"

"That has been said many times. Do you still want to have lunch?"

"Can I ask you a question and get a straight, honest 'yes' or 'no' answer?"

"Yes, though I might decline to answer either way, depending on the question."

"Did you expect lunch to end up with us in your hotel room?"

"No. I never expect anything to happen."

"Implying that you take advantage of opportunities to hook up?" Raven asked.

"I am free to manage my life as I see fit," I replied. "Just as my kids, wives, and girlfriends are."

"So you did think about it."

"Yes, but I'm sure you think about things you don't expect to happen, or even don't intend to do. I strongly suspect that the idea of ending up in my hotel room at least crossed your mind before you asked me to have lunch, even if it was only that you thought I might think it was an invitation."

"I obviously thought about it because I asked."

"Let me sign your form, please," I requested. "And you still owe me an answer about lunch."

She handed back a small clipboard with the trip form. I signed it, added a generous tip, and handed it back to her.

"Let me get this straight," Raven said. "You have three wives, two girlfriends, and you're allowed to play around?"

"That is the gist of it, yes."

"Isn't having multiple wives illegal?"

"Only if you try to obtain multiple, simultaneous marriage certificates. The government doesn't care how many women you marry serially; they only care if you try to marry them in parallel. So being married multiple times isn't a problem, so long as you do it in a government-approved way. But we don't care about government approval, so only Jessica and I are legally married. Kara, Suzanne, and I do not ever hold ourselves out to the government as married or try to obtain any benefits of married couples. In Illinois, it's not illegal to claim to be married when you are not, so long as you don't lie to the government about it."

"Why do the Mormons get busted?"

"I can't say about the general case, because state laws vary, but the ones you hear about nationally all involve underage girls compelled to marry. Everyone in my group is over eighteen and there voluntarily."

"So why two girlfriends? Why not five wives?"

"Both Natalie and Yuriko want kids, and I had a vasectomy after my youngest was born. They also are both leaving Chicago -- Natalie when she goes to graduate school in Russia and Yuriko when she returns to Japan after completing her Master's at the University of Chicago."

"I have to ask how this came about."

"If you still want to have lunch, I'm happy to tell the story."

"Yes. Let me speak to Jamie, the Bellman, and then we can just walk down California Street to Chinatown."

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Are you available on the 30th for the photo shoot?" Bob asked after Photography Club.

"Yes," I replied. "I saw the long-range forecast that it could be in the in the upper 50s next week."

"Unfortunately. That rules out any snow pictures, and I'm pretty sure it rules out any outdoor ice skating."

"Then it's indoor action shots!" I smirked.

Bob laughed, "You have a one-track mind, as always! I was thinking about switching to interior shots. Do you think your dad would let us use your house?"

"I'm positive he will. What were you thinking?"

"Pictures of you, Meghan, and Cassie, in various casual poses. You know, lounging on the couch, sitting at the kitchen table, reading, drinking tea or coffee, and so on. There's enough variation in the rooms at your house to keep it interesting. We can even pretend it's actually cold outside by lighting a fire if your dad would allow it."

"Dad is totally cool, which you should know by now! He's actually in California, but I can text or call him and let him know what we want to do."

"Cool. I'll have Meghan and Cassie bring four or five changes of clothes."

"Pajamas, too," I replied. "We could have a pretend pajama party!"

"You don't wear pajamas!" Bob said with a silly grin.

"But I have some! I even have a pair that would pass muster with photos that would be shown at Photography Club. And have them bring bathing suits for sauna photos."

"I'm not sure that would be good for the camera equipment."

"When my dad had the house built, a photographer took shots for an architectural magazine. I can show you, and you'll see faked photos -- they sprayed water on their faces and arms and it looks real even though they never turned on the sauna."

"Oh, that's cool!" Bob exclaimed. "I like it! Your dad won't have a problem with setting up lights and using screens or reflectors?"

"No. Seriously, don't worry about it. I'll clear it with Dad and it'll be cool. The only day he'd object to would be Boxing Day, because that's the day all the grandparents visit. We'll have other guests during break, but that won't be a problem."

"I'll let the girls know!"

We left the room, and I went to meet Fangsu, Zahra, and Zaida to walk home so we could do our homework.

[San Francisco, California]

 Steve

"That's about the craziest story I've ever heard," Raven stated when I'd finished telling the tale.

I'd shortened it dramatically, given we had limited time, and had left out a number of things which either couldn't be shared or weren't relevant. I also omitted any specific reference to what Jennifer had started calling the 'body count' when we were Seniors in High School, though separated by most of a continent.

"The thing is, it's only crazy if we accept social norms as a straitjacket. I don't. In fact, I reject that reality and substitute my own. The thing is, everyone does that whether they admit it or not."

"How so?"

"There is no reality except that which is perceived, and your perception of reality and mine are different, as they are from every other person. What allows us to function as a society is that some of that perception overlaps. Problems arise when we attempt to force our perception onto others and try to force them into our reality. That's doomed to fail, and if taken far enough, will cause social unrest, leading to civil war and an authoritarian government."

"Not anarchy?"

"Briefly, but most people want order and dislike change, and sadly, large pluralities are happy with being told what to do. Well, so long as the person telling them what to do is somehow 'one of them'. People resist change and are afraid of true freedom. With regard to change, the only way to make sense out of it is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance. With regard to freedom, it's accepting that with great freedom comes great responsibility."

"Now you sound like my Intro to Philosophy teacher Senior year."

"I run a twice-a-month Philosophy Club and have given seminars at San Diego State and University of Chicago Medical School."

"You said you were a computer programmer!"

"Professionally; I'm an amateur philosopher. I also didn't mention I'm a 6th Dan black belt in Shōtōkan karate."

"I noticed you were in good shape."

"For an old guy?" I asked with a grin.

Raven laughed, "I said you didn't look forty!"

"Good thing, given I'm only thirty-nine!"

"Are you always a smart ass?"

"Life is too short to be too serious. There are times which demand a sober approach; those times should not dominate your life, no matter what your job."

"President?"

"Reagan told jokes and was quick to quip, and it didn't hurt his reputation at all; in fact, I'd say it enhanced it. Most people have a good sense of humor, and those who don't have little actual impact. Loki help us if the humorless whiners ever come to power in a serious way."

"Loki? The Norse god? You're pagan?"

"I'm a skeptic who is agnostic, eclectic, and syncretistic. For me, Loki is simply the personification of change and chaos. In the past, I often referred to Fate as if it were a person, but I find Loki to be a better fit."

"I hate to end this conversation, but I have to make a pickup in about twenty minutes. Is there any chance of getting together again before you go home?"

"I assumed you'd find a way to provide the return ride to the airport on Sunday."

"I did plan to do that, but does your schedule allow breakfast beforehand?"

Keki's flight left at 9:00am, so she was going to the airport separately, as she'd need to leave the hotel by 6:00am, and I didn't want to hang out at the airport for an extra four hours, even though I had access to the Admiral's Club.

"It's possible, yes," I replied. "What's your schedule like?"

"Sunday would be my day off, but as you guessed, I was going to ask for your trip."

"7:30am?" I asked. "Meet at the hotel?"

"That works. There are some great places to have breakfast in San Francisco. Anything special you want to eat?"

"I love sourdough, but my diet doesn't permit it. You pick, because I can get bacon and eggs anyplace, or a good omelette."

"Let me think about it," she said. "I'll come up with something good!"

"I look forward to it!"

We left the restaurant and walked up the steep incline of California Street to the Mark Hopkins. Raven got my bag from the trunk, I thanked her, and as she got back into the black Lincoln Town Car, I headed into the hotel to check in. Ten minutes later, I was in the suite, which had the usual basket of fruit, two bottles of wine, and a box of Ghirardelli chocolate.

The first thing I did was take a shower to rinse off any airline grime, then dressed in fresh clothes. After the shower, I still had three hours to kill, even having spent close to an hour at lunch with Raven, so I pulled out my Titanium PowerBook G4, powered it on, and while it was booting, I set up my Airport base station and plugged it into the hotel ethernet port. I knew I had no pressing email, as all my email was properly sync'd with my Blackberry device, which I found very convenient, though I liked the form factor of my Motorola RAZR much better, as it fit in my pocket. The Blackberry was too large for that, so I had a holster clip on my belt instead.

I browsed Usenet, but it was becoming less and less useful as the sheer number of trolls, spammers, and off-topic posts interfered with good discussions. There were a few moderated groups that were fine, but mostly it had become a vast wasteland. I had just finished reading when Birgit texted me to ask about a photo shoot, and I responded affirmatively.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"Go for Jesse!" I said when I answered my mobile phone late on Wednesday afternoon.

"«Привет», Jesse Stepanovich! This is Larisa Dmitriyevna!" ('Hello')

"Hi, Larisa! I'm looking forward to seeing you in two weeks!"

"Me, too! I wanted to ask if it would be possible to go ice skating? If so, I will bring my skates."

"The weather is too warm for the outdoor rinks," I said. "But we can go to an indoor rink."

"Good! How is hockey?"

"We won our final game on Sunday. The playoffs start on January 11th."

"You were first, yes?"

"Yes."

"Father wants to come see you play in the championship game! He will ask you about it when we visit."

"OK. Is there anything else you wanted to do while you're here?"

"A friend said we should see the windows at the famous department store."

"Marshall Field's," I replied. "We can do that for sure!"

"Good! I will see you in twelve days!"

"See you then!"

"«Пока!»" ('Bye!')

"Bye!"

I closed my phone, slipped it back into my pocket, and returned to doing math homework with Brooke, as we'd completed the other kind of integration before the math kind.

"Assignation?" she asked with a smirk.

"We're just friends."

"You and I are just friends!" Brooke declared. "That does not appear to be a barrier to having fun with our clothes off!"

"Not everyone is ready to have sex as a teenager, and she's a few years younger than we are. Not to mention her dad is a former Red Army general!"

"As if my dad has a clue that we're doing anything other than homework! I sure haven't told him, and if he suspected, I'd never be allowed to be here alone with you! He thinks I'm a total nerd only interested in math!"

"You *are* a total nerd!" I chuckled.

"Who likes to fuck! But my dad does NOT need to know that and never will! I hope we can keep our arrangement until end of Senior year."

"You know I have no intention of becoming a couple with anyone, so unless you do, I'm happy to continue. Are you still planning math camp next Summer?"

"At MIT," Brooke replied. "I doubt it'll be as much fun as your hockey camp! Sixty math nerds is WAY different from a group of hockey players and groupies!"

"Right, because you're the only math nerd on the planet who likes sex!" I chuckled.

"The boys last Summer were more interested in slide rules than sliding into home, so to speak!"

I laughed, "And I'll bet you that's lack of confidence and lack of experience. You could find one who's interesting and show him there's more to life than mathematics!"

"Brooke Stephenson, corrupter of nerds?" she asked with a smirk. "There's only one downside to your suggestion -- what are the chances that a random math nerd at math camp will have had an STD test?"

"You can get results in twenty-four hours," I replied. "Just find the local clinic. I'm positive there will be at least one in Cambridge."

"It would make the evenings more interesting!" Brooke declared.

"Glad I could help!"

[San Francisco, California]

 Steve

The room phone rang just after 5:00pm and I picked up the handset.

"Steve Adams."

"Mr. Adams, this is Kelly at Reception. Miss Aukai has arrived and presented proper ID. I want to confirm it's OK to give her a room key."

"Absolutely," I replied. "Thank you."

I replaced the handset and about three minutes later, I heard the latch in the door click, then the door opened and Keiki came in.

"Hi!" she exclaimed.

"Hi!" I replied, standing up.

Keiki was a bit shorter than Nalani, had a compact body, had a mix of Chinese and Hawai'ian features, and had long black hair that reached her waist. I walked over and took her bag, which I chose to set on a table, rather than presumptuously put it in the bedroom, though I had little doubt it would end up there.

"How was your campus visit?"

"Great! I'm positive I'm going to like it there. I applied for early acceptance, and now that I've seen the campus, I'll sign the form."

"Awesome. Does that mean the scholarships and grants are confirmed?"

"Once I sign the form, they'll begin processing them and let me know the total amount by March. But things look very good."

"I'm glad it worked out that way."

"Can I ask why you were so uncomfortable with the idea?"

"It's a question of true consent, free from significant pressure. If the only way you could go to college was to make the deal, then were you truly free to make it?"

"If you limit the choice to going to one of my preferred schools, I suppose, but I could have gone to school in Hawai'i and focused on basic engineering, then

figured out a way to get a Master's in aerospace engineering. But I take issue with the way you phrase it, because aren't there *always* things which influence decisions? You seem to imply no Free Will."

I smiled, "An astute analysis, and one I apply generally, but a long time ago, a friend of mine convinced me that consent needs to be as free of obvious compulsion as possible."

"Hormones?" Keiki asked.

"*External* pressure," I replied with a grin. "And there's a difference between convincing someone and pressuring them, though I admit the distinction can be difficult to draw. That said, I've also made the point that every human interaction involves an exchange of value, and each person has to analyze the exchange for themselves."

"But not with regard to sex? How is that different?"

"I've struggled with that question in the past, and nearly always it comes down to that same series of discussions that resulted in my view that positive consent is required. And, to be honest, it really only comes into play with girls who are virgins and whose circumstances suggest might be susceptible to some kind of pressure. I've mostly moved past my outdated thinking on that, but the proposed arrangement made me consider the situation carefully."

"If I hadn't asked about help for college, there wouldn't have been a concern?"

"Certainly not given the amount of time that has passed since you first contacted me."

"And switching from what amounted to a *quid pro quo* in your mind to thanking you didn't allay those concerns?"

"It attenuated them, but didn't dispel them. But that's my problem, not yours. How about we have dinner?"

"That sounds good! Where?"

"I thought for tonight our best option is the Top of the Mark upstairs."

"Because you don't want to stray from the hotel?" Keiki asked with an inviting smile.

"We can go out if you like," I replied.

"No, the hotel restaurant is fine."

"Did you want to freshen up?"

"Yes, please."

She picked up her bag and walked into the bedroom. She placed her bag on the bed, pulled out a small bag and went into the bathroom.

LXIII. Hers and His First Times

December 18, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

"What do you hope to gain from the four days we have together?" I asked, as we had coffee after dinner.

Keiki had showed me her STI test results before we'd come to the restaurant, so that requirement was met, and nothing stood in the way of three full days and nights of passion.

"Nalani suggested you might ask a question like that! I'm not sure I need the same treatment as Nalani because we've had quite a few deep philosophical conversations, something she started doing after she was with you. As she put it, the mindfuck preceded the physical one."

Which confirmed my impression of Nalani's statement that Keiki was prepared.

"Skip to the end?" I asked with a grin.

Keiki laughed, "Nalani and I love that movie! And she told me about your fetish for movie quotes."

"My reputation precedes me!" I replied.

"About everything!" Keiki declared. "Nalani was *very* detailed."

"I'm not surprised. Based on her descriptions, did you have a preferred way to proceed?"

"I also did some outside reading to prepare for the introductory course!" Keiki smiled. "I want to start with a bubble bath, if that's OK."

"It absolutely is."

"Is there some specific thing you want me to do?"

"Have orgasms!" I replied. "It's incumbent on the guy to ensure his partner has the maximum pleasure possible."

Keiki laughed, "I won't object, but I think you know what I meant."

"I actually prefer long, slow, sensual lovemaking," I replied. "Along with mutual oral sex."

"Mutual, as in at the same time?"

"Yes."

"Not something you and Nalani did."

"No, it wasn't. But that was her choice. You make your own choices."

"May I make what might be a strange observation?" Keiki asked.

"Of course. Say or ask anything; you won't offend me or upset me."

"Oral sex seems way more intimate than intercourse. I know some girls do that to delay having intercourse, but allowing a guy to ejaculate in your mouth just

seems SO much more intimate, not to mention the trust required on the part of the guy."

"Rational thought tends to go out the window when lips or tongues touch a man's genitals, so I'm not sure that trust is even a consideration!"

Keiki rolled her eyes and shook her head, "Boys and blowjobs!"

"Have you dated?"

"I've accepted invitations to school dances ever since eighth grade, but no guy got more than a 'good night' kiss because I didn't want a reputation and I wasn't really ready. This year, we go out in groups and nobody has really paired off."

"That does seem to be more common now than when I was in High School and everyone tried to pair off. My kids are mixed on that, with two of them having paired off, one intending to pair off, and two playing the field, as it were. And two who haven't made their intentions known as yet."

"That's something else that's a bit strange about being here -- I never expected my first time to be with a guy who was married and had kids. And even stranger his wives know and don't object."

"Nobody in my family accepts social norms as controlling," I said. "That's true about many of my friends, and all the members of my Philosophy Club."

"That's something I'd really like to experience, but I think I'd have to come to Chicago. Nalani said was hoping to participate in one when she's in Chicago."

"We'll have an impromptu rap session, not a formal meeting, given the timing of her visit and other stuff going on. Ready for our bubble bath?"

"Yes!"

I signaled the waiter, signed the receipt to have the bill charged to my room, then took Keiki's hand and led her towards the elevators.

[Aurora, Illinois]

 Matthew

"What did Mrs. Jones say?" I asked Mom when she came back from seeing Maggie's mom.

"She'd noticed Maggie was out of sorts. I was careful about what I said because I didn't want Maggie to have trouble with her parents."

"What?" I asked with a smirk. "Telling extremely religious parents their daughter wants to have sex with a guy who's in a committed relationship with someone else might set them off?"

Mom smiled and nodded, "Pretty much."

"So, what did you say?"

"Just that we'd noticed Maggie was behaving differently and seemed troubled. Mrs. Jones didn't ask why, so I'm not sure if that was because she didn't think I knew or because she had some idea that Maggie was fixated on you, though not why."

"What is Mrs. Jones going to do?" I asked.

"She said she'd talk to Maggie, which is pretty much all we can ask, unless you want to violate Maggie's trust and tell them why, at least in broad strokes without the specifics."

"She'd hate me forever," I replied. "Though I'm not sure it's going to turn out any better unless I break up with Chelsea. Even if I was more like Dad, it wouldn't help because Maggie would never go for that kind of thing. She wants me all to herself."

"So does Chelsea!" Mom declared.

"And Chelsea has dibs!" I declared. "I didn't meet Maggie until three years ago; I've known Chelsea for basically my whole life. And I would never even consider changing anything with Chelsea. I'm happy, Chelsea is happy, and we want to be together. Maggie knows that and she's known that since not long after I met her."

"You don't have to sell me!" Mom replied with a smile. "Once you decided against running away, we all knew where this was headed! Of course, we thought that was true of Jesse and Francesca, too."

"Until her mom went batshit crazy!" I declared.

"Your dad and I have met a few other moms who were like that, too."

"Grandma Adams?"

"Among others. Fortunately, your dad met Melanie's parents, and he learned a lot from them. Jennifer's parents were tolerant, but not nearly as open-minded as Frank and Trudy Spencer."

"Chelsea's mom is pretty cool."

"She is. She helped your dad a lot with advice and guidance when he was in Junior High."

"Chelsea said dad was an altar boy at the funeral for her mom's first husband who died in Vietnam."

"He was. That was the first time I ever saw him, but didn't meet him, and didn't see him again until the wedding. I didn't recognize him, of course, but we figured out later we'd been in the same church that day. I'm sure Melanie and her parents were there, too, though I never asked."

"Small world, as they say," I observed. "I guess at this point all I can do is try to be Maggie's friend, but I'm not sure that's going to work."

"Neither am I," Mom agreed.

[San Francisco, California]

 Steve

When we reached the room, we went to the bedroom, and I stepped into the bathroom to begin filling the tub. Once the water was the correct temperature, I closed the drain and added bubble bath from the bottle provided by the hotel. As suds began to build, I stepped back into the bedroom.

"Two firsts to start with," Keiki said with a smile. "The first male to see me naked and the first male I'll see naked! And then a bunch more firsts!"

"Do you want me to undress first, do you want to undress first, or together?"

"One a time, I think," Keiki replied. "I don't want to miss anything!"

I nodded and without prompting I removed my blue Oxford button-down shirt, t-shirt, khakis, socks, and finally my briefs, with Keiki watching intently the entire time.

"You're in very good shape," she observed. "6th Dan in Shōtōkan, right?"

I nodded, "Yes."

Keiki unbuttoned her pink blouse, shrugged it off, then removed her Chinos and socks, stopping at that point to do a slow pirouette clad only in her white lacy bra and panties. After the three-sixty, she smiled, unhooked her bra and let it fall away, revealing small breasts with hard light-brown nipples. I smiled at her and she quickly removed her panties.

She stood still for a moment as I took in the fullness of her perfectly proportioned 5'1" frame. My eyes were drawn to a neatly trimmed V of pubic hair, pointing to full, plump labia which already glistened with her juices. She smiled and then did another slow turn, showing me her firm, toned butt, before facing me again.

"Would you like to share a kiss before we bathe?" I asked.

"Yes," Keiki breathed.

I held out my arms, and she stepped forward, pressing her naked body lightly against mine and putting her arms around me. She turned her face up for a kiss, I put my arms around her, then bent so I could plant a soft kiss on her lips. Keiki parted her lips and my tongue sought hers and we exchanged a soft, sexy French kiss.

"Yeah," she sighed deeply when we broke the kiss a moment later.

I was so tempted to scoop her into my arms and put her on the bed, but instead took her hands and led her into the bathroom. I stepped into the tub, helped her in, then sat down and encouraged her to sit between my legs, which she did. She

rested her back against my chest, I put my arms around her, and she sighed deeply once again.

"Amazing," she breathed.

"It gets better!" I said quietly.

"Touch me?" she requested.

I moved my left hand to her left breast and my right hand between her legs, gently tweaking her nipple as I pressed on her clitoral hood.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Wow!"

She seemed to be very sensitive, something borne out over the next few minutes as gentle rubbing with my right hand and strumming with my left thumb caused her to moan continually and groan twice.

"My mouth will feel even better," I whispered.

"I want you to do that," she replied huskily, "but after..."

"Whatever you want," I said. "Shall I continue?"

"Oh, yes!" she whispered urgently.

I lost count of the small orgasms Keiki had in the tub, with me pausing only to turn off the taps when the water and suds covered her chest. When the water began to cool, I opened the drain, then we stood up and got out of the tub. I led Keiki to the shower to rinse the suds from our bodies, then used a large, white, fluffy towel to dry both of us. I scooped her into my arms and carried her to the bed, which I'd already turned down.

"I want you on top the first time," she whispered.

I nodded and laid her on the bed, then climbed in next to her. Because she didn't want me to lick her, I picked up the tube of lubricant I'd put on the night table and Keiki watched intently as I spread it on my shaft and glans. I returned the tube to the table, then moved between Keiki's legs, positioning my glans against her labia.

"Be gentle..." she requested, her voice barely above a whisper.

She was, in my mind, thinking about the myth of painful first intercourse, a myth that wouldn't die, despite it being the exception, not the rule, so long as appropriate foreplay or lubrication were used. I nodded, kissed her softly, and gently pushed my hips forward. Artificial and natural lube allowed me to easily slip past her engorged labia.

"Oomph," Keiki gasped.

I kissed her, then pushed forward slowly, entering her extremely tight tunnel. There wasn't always a direct relation between body size and tightness, but Keiki's tight tunnel matched her small stature and compact size. Two more gentle thrusts had me fully embedded in Keiki, and when I lowered my lips to hers for another kiss, she wrapped her legs around my butt, then pulled me down so my body pressed hers into the mattress.

"Slow and make it last..." Keiki gasped.

I began moving and after four gentle thrusts, Keiki began moving with me. She had a dozen orgasms over the next twenty minutes as I savored the wonderful sensation of her very tight tunnel, eventually allowing the pleasure of the ripples

and spasms to take me over the edge, pushing deep as I fired jets of cum deep inside Keiki.

When my orgasm passed, I gently withdrew, moved down and sucked on each tiny nipple, then kissed my way down to Keiki's pubic hair. I stopped to nuzzle my nose, then pressed my tongue into her, enjoying the tangy taste of her juices. Keiki gasped when I pressed the tip of my tongue against her clit, then groaned deeply when I sucked and licked, causing her to have another orgasm. I gave her one more before moving up to exchange a deep French kiss, from which she did not shy away.

"I'm not sure four days will be enough," she said, breathing hard.

"The only solution I can offer is to find someone like Jun Hie."

"Yes, of course, but I meant I'd want to see you again in the future."

"The only restrictions are if you were in a committed relationship or would want overnight privileges. The former is non-negotiable; the latter would mean asking my wives."

"I thought you were in charge of your sex life."

"I am. There are two rules I need to follow that are, in effect, the price of freedom -- girls have to have recent STI tests and overnights need permission. Other than that, it's up to me. I also have my own rule about anyone who is in a committed relationship, which you know about."

"You liked doing it with me?"

"I did. Very much."

"And you want to do it again?"

"Of course!"

"Now?"

"Yes!"

This time I began by pleasuring Keiki with my mouth, and after she had a pair of orgasms, I was hard again, so I moved up, entered her, and we resumed our slow-motion lovemaking with the same pattern and results as our first coupling, and as I had the first time, I moved down to pleasure her again with my mouth.

"Would you like what every boy wants?" Keiki asked with a silly smile after I kissed her with her juices on my face, lips, and tongue.

"I won't say 'no'," I replied. "But I very much prefer what we just did!"

Keiki kissed me, then gently nudged me, so I moved off her and lay on my back. She turned, straddled my face, lowered herself until her labia touched my lips, then grasped me and took me into her mouth. She knew exactly what to do, and gave me a slow, sexy blowjob while I pleased her with my mouth. She had three orgasms before I tensed, groaned, and pulsed in her mouth. Keiki swallowed my cum, then released me, turned, and we exchanged a deep French kiss.

"What did you think?" she asked.

"I believe you already received my positive response!" I chuckled.

Keiki laughed softly, "I suppose so! How many times before you need to sleep?"

"Three or four more," I replied.

"Then twice with me on top, once more with our mouths, and then a final one with you on top before we fall asleep."

"Your wish is my command!"



December 19, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

When Keiki and I woke up, we made love, showered together, then had breakfast delivered by room service.

"Besides the obvious," I said as we began eating, "what do you want to do today?"

"I've never been here before, but I know you have. Could you show me the city?"

"Yes. And we could do some shopping."

"Nalani suggested Victoria's Secret!"

"We can do that. What's your favorite color?"

"Red, but I think something sheer and white would be better, though I know lavender is your favorite color!"

"Nalani did give you all the details!"

"She did!"

We finished our breakfast, then put on our jackets. I grabbed my fedora, and we headed out to see San Francisco, starting with a cable car ride down California Street. We visited Fisherman's Wharf, Coit Tower, had lunch, and then went to Ghirardelli Chocolate Company. After I bought chocolate for everyone back home, we headed to Victoria's Secret. I almost laughed when I saw the same sales clerk -- Cheryl -- who Nalani and I had seen in June. It was obvious she recognized me, but she didn't say anything until Keiki took several items into a dressing room to try them on.

"You have a thing for Oriental girls, I see," Cheryl said quietly. "I suppose California Blondes are boring? Or is twenty-three too old for you?"

"Yes, I do like Oriental girls, but the truth is I don't come to San Francisco very often, and I expressly came to meet Keiki."

"How do you meet these girls?"

"I met Nalani, who was with me in June, in Hawai'i, and Keiki is her friend."

"Word of mouth? You must be *really* good!"

"I've had no complaints," I replied.

"I'm still interested in a 'sugar daddy'!"

"As I said last time, not what this is. I'm simply mentoring them."

"Complete with an Amex Platinum card!"

"I'm a successful entrepreneur," I replied. "And I make friends easily."

"So it seems!"

"Steve?" I heard Keiki call out. "Come see."

I excused myself and went to the dressing room, went inside, and closed the door behind me.

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

"I thought you'd like it!"

She was wearing a white lace teddy and white chiffon peignoir that accented her body perfectly.

"I actually prefer clothing which leave something to the imagination. Not that I mind seeing you naked! If you want those, I'll let the clerk know."

"These and a lavender bra and panty set?"

"I'll have her ring them up," I said.

I left the dressing room and walked over to Cheryl.

"The teddy and peignoir, plus a lavender bra and panty set," I said, handing over my Amex Platinum card.

"If you come back, I'll arrange for a private fashion show!" Cheryl offered.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied.

Keiki came out of the dressing room just as Cheryl finished ringing up our purchase. She ran my card, I signed the carbonless flimsy, she handed me the bag, and Keiki and I left the store.

"She was flirting with you, right?"

"Yes."

"The same one who flirted with you when you brought Nalani to the store?"

"Yes. And as with Nalani, you have my full attention!"

"I appreciate that! Do you think she's pretty?"

"Yes, though I think you're prettier!"

Keiki laughed, "And said with a straight face! She has a much nicer body than mine!"

I shook my head, "You have the exact body type I prefer."

"I thought guys all liked big boobs!"

"I strongly prefer smaller ones, like yours. I'll show you when we get back to the hotel!"

"I prefer your tongue somewhere else, but that feels good, too."

"I prefer my tongue inside you as well! I love how you taste!"

"When we get back to the hotel, can we take a bubble bath like we did last night?"

"Yes."

"Then make love until we can't?"

"Yes."



December 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Congratulations!" I said to Rachel when Tiffany, Naomi, Hannah, Fangsu, and I arrived at her apartment early on Friday evening. "How does it feel to have graduated High School!"

"Great!"

"Are you going to walk in June?" Tiffany asked.

"I'm not sure," Rachel replied. "I mean, I can, if I want to, but by then I'll have finished my first semester of college and I'm not sure I want to set foot in Kenwood Academy ever again!"

"It really has gone into the toilet," Naomi said. "That's why all of us are either at Maria or the Lab School."

"We got you a gift," Hannah said. "We all went in together to get it."

She handed Rachel a gift bag that had a cute sweater in it. Rachel took it out and held it up.

"Thanks!" she exclaimed. "I'll wear it tonight."

"We're glad you're hanging out with us!" I declared. "Javon is coming along, right?"

"Yes. He'll meet us at Giordano's at 6:30pm."

"Is he going to see *Maid in Manhattan* with us or *Star Trek: Nemesis* with the guys?"

"What do you think?" Rachel asked, rolling her eyes.

"BOYS!" Naomi groaned.

"I bet Birgit's dad would see the movie with us!" Tiffany declared.

"Don't bet on it," I replied. "He'd want to see *Star Trek*, I'm sure. And I know he's going to see *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* with my brothers and some friends during break. He *would* watch *Maid in Manhattan* under the right circumstances."

"I bet we could get him to watch it with us!" Hannah declared.

I laughed and rolled my eyes, "Oh, I'm sure! Shall we go?"

The six of us left Rachel's apartment and headed for the restaurant.



December 21, 2002, Saint Charles, Illinois

 Michael

"Your dad isn't here this morning?" Andi asked after scanning the crowd when we walked into the gym where the robot challenge course was set up.

"No. He had to go to California," I replied. "Eduardo is recording it and Dad and I will watch with the grandpas on Thursday. He offered to change his plans, but I said it was OK. Matthew, Jesse, and Albert are here."

"Right, I saw them. Your brothers are more important than your dad?"

"I actually spend more time with Eduardo and your dad than my dad. That's my choice, and Dad is cool about it."

"Why?"

I shrugged, "I don't know, actually. I just like spending time with Eduardo and your dad."

"Not because your dad has all those girls around?"

"I'm WAY more annoyed by teenage sisters than I am by extra moms or aunts!"

"You like me!"

"You're not my sister! Let's go find Joe, Manuel, Darius, and Rashaad!"

We found them, and about twenty minutes later, the competition began with the block stacking challenge, and Aurora East went first. They set a good time, slightly better than the best time we'd set in our practice. We went third and

completed the challenge ten seconds slower, but that left us in second place and within striking distance. Naperville Central was third, about twenty seconds slower than us, and Sugar Grove was fourth, nearly a minute slower than us.

The teams competed in reverse order for the obstacle course, which meant we went second-to-last and Aurora East last. We did really well, and Aurora East made a minor mistake, allowing us to beat them by eleven seconds, which put us one second ahead with only the speed challenge remaining. We'd worked very hard to get the maximum from our bot, and we swapped out the heavy batteries for lighter ones which would have just enough power to complete the two hundred meters.

Saving a few ounces might make all the difference in the world, as it allowed us to get to full speed faster. That was doubly important, as the rules required that we come to a complete stop over the end line, then go into reverse. In our tests, that had proved to be worth more than a second overall.

"What do you think?" Manuel asked.

"I think we can do it," Joe replied. "We just have to be perfect. Andi's suggestion to prioritize acceleration and use the smallest batteries possible means we should be fast enough to hold the lead. The worst we can do is second."

"I like battlebots better," Darius said. "I'm glad that's the competition in May."

"It's fun," Andi replied. "But robots doing what we're doing today can do actual work."

"Dad says they'll take away jobs," Manuel said.

"People have said that about every innovation ever in history!" Andi countered. "The Jacquard Loom, the automobile, computers, and so on. But instead, they

increased employment, it was just different jobs. Sure, it displaced some workers, but they had positive effects on the economy and created more jobs than they destroyed."

"Today's capitalist soliloquy brought to you by Andi Peterson!" Manuel declared.

"Let's focus on winning!" I suggested.

Once again, the competition was done in reverse order, which meant we would go last and would know the time we had to beat. Aurora East set a fantastic time, but it was identical to our best time in practice. If we could equal that, we'd win by a second. Manuel, our driver, did even better than that, beating our best practice time by a second, giving us a two-second victory, with the third-place team being over two minutes behind.

"Great job, guys!" Mr. Perez exclaimed when the time was announced.

My phone in my pocket buzzed, and I pulled it out to find a text from my dad.

"Congrats! See you soon! Love, Dad!"

I almost laughed because only dad wrote full sentences and used punctuation and capitals in text messages. I texted back 'thx', then closed my phone.

[San Francisco, California]

 Steve

"My son's team won a robotics competition," I said to Keiki as I slipped my phone back into my pocket at lunch.

"You missed it for me?"

"I spoke to him in advance and his mom's boyfriend, Eduardo, recorded it. We'll watch on Boxing Day with all the grandpas and some family friends."

"Boxing Day?"

"The day after Christmas. We mostly don't celebrate it in the US, but it's a big deal in the UK."

"Oh, wait! I remember! It's when they reverse roles, right?"

"Yes. We don't celebrate that way, but it's a convenient way to refer to the day after Christmas Day. And it's the day when all the grandparents visit to celebrate Christmas with the kids. We decided a long time ago not to try to travel for the holidays."

"With seven kids, that would be crazy!" Keiki observed.

"Not to mention four moms, so eight sets of grandparents. And it's a little more complicated because Jessica's biological dad isn't the one who raised her."

"With just an older sister, and the entire extended family living within ten miles of each other, it's easy for us."

"What did you want to do after lunch?" I asked.

"What do you think?!" Keiki asked coquettishly.

"I'll need a nap if you want the same thing tonight!"

"Of course I do! And one final time in the morning!"

"I shall endeavor to please!"

"You do! Can I make a request?"

"We can always ask for things, but that doesn't mean the answer will always be 'yes'. What?"

"Could I spend the Summer with your family? After graduation, obviously, and before I start at Stanford."

"Guests are always welcome," I replied with a smile. "But you wouldn't be able to monopolize my time."

"I totally understand, but I want to meet your family and participate in your Philosophy Club. And we could spend some time together, right?"

"Within limits, because I have obligations at work and to my family. If that's OK, then make your plans and let me know."

"Great! Perhaps I could be your Summer girlfriend while I'm in college?"

"Again, within limits, and that needs to be discussed with my wives. Short-term situations are totally up to me; longer-term situations require a discussion. Either way, you can certainly visit."

"OK. I'll let you know."

We finished our lunches, I paid the bill, and we headed back to the hotel.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

When I arrived home from afternoon karate class, which I lead because Miyu was home with her baby and Dad was in San Francisco, obviously deflowering a virgin, I went right to my room to change clothes. Tomás would arrive in about ten minutes, but that was enough time because I'd showered at the dojo. I quickly stripped, then put on my sexy black lace bra and panties, pulled on a pair of faded jeans, then chose a cute red sweater from my wardrobe. I brushed my hair, double-checked myself in the mirror, then went downstairs. About a minute later, the doorbell rang, and I went to answer it.

"Hi!" Tomás exclaimed.

"Ah," I said with a smirk, "the virgin sacrifice!"

Tomás laughed, "Well, if I die, I believe I'll die happy!"

"Guaranteed!" I declared. "But the only way you'll die is if I am not happy!"

"I have a pretty good idea what to do, and I'll do my best!"

"Your best? Your best?" I smirked. "Losers whine about their best! Winners go home and fuck the Prom queen!"

Tomás laughed again, "*The Rock*. But you aren't a Prom queen!"

"I'm better! And if you come upstairs, you'll get to fuck me! Repeatedly!"

"Then what are we waiting for?"

I giggled, "I have no idea!"

I grabbed his hand and led him up to my room, past Ashley, who smirked and rolled her eyes, and into my room. I closed and locked the door, then turned on the stereo, which was tuned to the smooth jazz station I liked.

"In my experience, teenage boys often lose it quickly the first time, so to prevent ANY disappointment, we'll start with me giving you what every boy on the planet wants!"

"Tickets to the seventh game of the Stanley Cup finals?!"

I rolled my eyes, "If *that* is what you want, you're in the wrong place! You can go across the backyard and see Jesse! On the other hand, if you want a sexy fourteen-year-old girl to give you an amazing blowjob and swallow your cum, stay and get naked. Your choice!"

Not being a «jävla idiot», Tomás quickly pulled his Kenwood Academy Hockey sweatshirt over his head and tossed it on the love seat. When he pulled off his t-shirt, I began undressing as well, and a minute later, we were both naked. I'd seen Tomás naked and erect, so I knew he was about average in size, but size wasn't all that important. Far more important was attention to detail, where 'detail' was defined as my clit and nipples!

I moved Tomás towards the love seat and gave him a slight push, which he understood meant he should sit down. I knelt in front of him, grasped his rock-hard dick, and planted a kiss on the tip. He twitched, which told me he wouldn't last long, so I looked up, winked, then opened my mouth and slowly took him into my mouth. I swirled my tongue, sucked gently, and as I'd expected, he groaned as cum spurted into my mouth.

I sucked and swirled my tongue as the pulses continued, and when they finally stopped, I swallowed, bobbed twice, then released Tomás' dick. I looked up, saw he was in a daze, so I got up and sat in his lap. I kissed him, but was careful only

to have lip contact, as I didn't want him to freak out because boys could be touchy about kissing after blowjobs.

"That," Tomás said, breathing hard, "was great."

"The next one will be MUCH longer! But we have other business! My body needs to be worshiped with your lips and tongue!"

"Uhm, I've read a book, but..."

"If you follow directions, I promise you'll make me feel good!"

"Why does every girl on the planet feel the need to tell boys what to do?"

"Because girls are smarter than boys! And boys tend to be completely clueless! Not to mention thinking with the wrong head!"

Tomás laughed, "Says the girl who appears to have a one-track mind and offered to wildly fuck me!"

"We know what boys want!" I giggled. "And we control it!"

"What do you like?"

I smiled because that was exactly the right question to ask.

"Lick and suck my nipples, then put your tongue inside me, move it around, and also lick and suck my button."

I got off Tomás' lap and sat down next to him, spreading my legs wide. He moved from the couch, knelt between my legs, and lowered his mouth to my left boob. He took my nipple into his mouth and sucked gently while running his

tongue over it. It felt awesome, and I was positive when he kissed me between my legs, he'd get it exactly right.

Tomás sucked and licked my left nipple for a minute before switching to my right boob, where he spent a minute before he released my nipple. He shifted a bit and planted a tentative kiss on my pubic hair, then one on my labia, which were already slick with my juices.

"Do you like how I taste?" I asked with a silly smile.

"I need a better taste!" Tomás said, then pressed his tongue into me.

"Yes!" I hissed as he swirled his tongue and it brushed my clit.

It took a bit of guidance and encouragement, but Tomás managed to get me there once. I felt with practice he'd get better, but I wanted him inside me!

I touched the top of his head, and he looked up. I reached down to take his hand, we both stood up, and I led him to the bed. I pulled down the duvet, then had Tomás get in and lie on his back. He was mostly hard, and a few licks and sucks brought him to full mast. I quickly straddled him, grasped his shaft, held him upright, and slowly lowered myself onto him until my pubic hair touched his.

"Holy shit!" he exclaimed, panting.

"Yeah," I agreed.

I began moving, slowly at first, but less than five minutes later I was wildly fucking him as I'd promised, moving up and down and back and forth, bringing myself off twice before he groaned loudly and came about eight minutes after we'd started. I loved the feel of warm, sticky cum shooting into my pussy, and as it usually did, brought on a strong orgasm.

"Happy?" I asked with a smirk.

"Duh!" Tomás exclaimed, breathing hard.

I stretched out on top of him, my legs on either side of his, with him still inside me. We lay together until he softened and slipped out. Knowing teenage boys could quickly reload, there was no point in waiting longer.

"I want to sixty-nine," I said. "Then you can be on top."

"But I...never mind! I was going to be dumb!"

"Par for the course with boys!" I giggled. "But kissing after oral sex is fine with me, and should be fine with you."

"Er, yeah," he agreed, seemingly reluctantly.

"Consider it a fair price for services rendered!" I declared.

Tomás laughed, "I believe the price of admission is worth it!"

"Good!" I declared.

 Jesse

"What did you tell your parents," I asked Zahra as we got into the shower after fooling around.

"What do you mean?"

"There was no hockey today, which they could easily find out."

"I just said I was having lunch and spending the afternoon with friends. Fangsu will cover for me because I'll cover for her! She and Mitch are doing the same thing we are!"

"OK, though you should be careful who you say that to!"

"Obviously! I was sure it was safe to say that to you, but I'd never reveal it to anyone else. Even Birgit doesn't know!"

"I find THAT hard to believe," I chuckled.

"Seriously. Fangsu hasn't said anything to the other girls and basically acts as if nothing is happening."

"But they know about us, right?"

"Yes, because it was kind of difficult to hide it from Birgit. But nobody will tell."

"OK. I just don't want an uncomfortable conversation between our dads."

"Has that happened before?" Zahra asked.

"Yes, after the softball team was in the sauna."

Zahra laughed, "Jesse Block with twenty-two naked girls!"

"Nineteen," I chuckled. "But nothing happened. There was a lot of teasing, but no action."

"That would be crazy, even for you!"

"Oh," I chuckled, "I don't know about that!"

"You would? With nineteen girls?"

"I'm not Superman, but if the real opportunity had arisen, I'd have tried my best! But it was much safer to be able to say that nothing happened, and that's what saved my butt. The softball team got into some trouble, but in the end nothing came of it, and two of the dads became friends with my dad."

"I hope I can see you during break," Zahra said when we got out of the shower.

"It's going to be really busy with friends and family," I said. "I think two weeks from today is the next time I could see you. That's January 4th."

Zahra pouted, "OK. Maybe in January we can find a way to see each other more than just on Saturdays."

"Let's discuss it after the New Year, OK?"

"OK."

LXIV. A Serious Mindfuck

December 21, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

"Birgit!" Tomás spluttered, coughing.

I'd 'forgotten' to swallow after he'd cum in my mouth during sixty-nine.

"You'll live," I said with a smirk. "But I promise not to do that again without asking."

"As if I'd agree!" Tomás protested. "It's just...er, well, uhm, never mind."

"You were going to say 'gross' but knew I'd ask if you objected to having it in MY mouth, right?"

"Uh, yeah," he said sheepishly. "I realized that would be a dumb thing to say, given I liked you doing that."

"Well, for the rest of today, I'll only use my mouth to help you get hard, and you can fuck me as many times as you want! Any way you want."

"Any way?" he asked with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes, "If you can think it, I've probably done it at least once!"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. And that includes being with a girl!"

"WHOA!" Tomás exclaimed. "You're bi?"

"No, I'm Birgit!" I replied, my usual rejoinder to that question. "Sexuality is more complex than labels. I've experimented, and I strongly prefer guys, but girls are OK. And yes, I've had a threesome with a guy and a girl. And yes, I'd do that with you, if you want."

"A threesome?! Really?!"

"Boys and their fantasies!" I giggled. "But, yes, really. We'd just need to find a girl."

"You're the only one I know who will put...er, have sex with me."

"Nice save," I said. "I'm not going to get on your case for not being politically correct! And I might know a girl, but I'm not sure if she'd be interested."

"Because of me?"

"No, because it's complicated."

I was thinking about Libby, but I wasn't sure if Lilibeth would be OK with that. I knew she'd tolerated Libby and Jesse, though I also knew from Jesse that was basically over.

"But let's worry about that another time," I continued. "For now, let's fuck until dinner!"

"Yes!" Tomás readily agreed.



December 22, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

I had set the alarm for 4:00am so that Keiki and I had time for one final lovemaking session and a very intimate shower on Sunday morning. We had a light breakfast delivered by room service, and then I walked her down to the lobby where a driver from Golden Gate Livery, Raven's dad's company, was waiting.

"Thank you for a wonderful four days," Keiki said when we hugged.

"You're welcome. It was equally wonderful for me. And I do look forward to seeing you next Summer."

"Me, too! I'll let you know once I figure things out."

We hugged again, exchanged a quick kiss, and I walked out to the car with her. The driver held the door for her, she got in, he closed it, then got into the driver's seat. I returned her wave, and once the car disappeared up California Street, I went back inside and up to my room. I had about ninety minutes to kill, so I got out my laptop and connected to the internet. Almost immediately, *adium* pinged me.

NIKASStephanie: Hi!

NIKASSteve: Hi! What's up?

NIKASStephanie: Cole, Nichols, and Smith.

NIKASSteve: Ugh. Now what?

NIKASStephanie: They want a meeting.

NIKASSteve: Why would we do that? We can't admit liability and we'll win, anyway.

NIKASStephanie: Probably win. You know what might happen with a jury.

NIKASSteve: I don't think it gets that far, and we can draw it out for a long time, which doesn't help them. Why throw them a lifeline?

NIKASStephanie: You certainly sound like my brother! Take no prisoners!

NIKASSteve: Dante, the Brauns, et al. But you know I look for win-win, if possible. It's only when it's not that I go for the jugular.

NIKASStephanie: True. Ned, Jamie, and Liz say we should hear them out.

NIKASSteve: True. When?

NIKASStephanie: Tomorrow morning at 8:00am. Ned, Liz, and I will fly out this afternoon if you agree.

NIKASSteve: The day before Christmas Eve? Seriously?

NIKASStephanie: I know, but we can fly back tomorrow afternoon. If you weren't there, I'd have pushed it until January.

NIKASSteve: When did you find out?

NIKASStephanie: They sent a courier to McCarthy/Jenkins late yesterday. Ned received the documents about forty-five minutes ago and called the contact at Cole. Then he called Liz at home, who called me.

NIKASSteve: Are they asking for tomorrow?

NIKASStephanie: No. That was my idea because you're already there. Is it really a big deal to stay an extra day if we can make this go away?

NIKASSteve: Even before we file our reply? I don't get why they want a meeting now.

NIKASStephanie: Liz speculates they ran the suit by someone outside the firm who told them it's a loser.

NIKASSteve: My gut instinct is to make them sweat.

NIKASStephanie: Liz called it! 🤔 Ned suggests it's better to make it go away now, if we can.

NIKASSteve: Offering what?

NIKASStephanie: No idea. I suppose it depends on how far you'll go.

NIKASSteve: All the way! 😎

NIKASStephanie: 😬 You did that already, unless I miss my guess!

NIKASSteve: Whatever!

NIKASStephanie: What do you say?

NIKASSteve: All three lawyers say take the meeting, right?

NIKASStephanie: Yes. Liz said to say that, as your Consigliere, she strongly advises having the meeting.

NIKASSteve: I have dinner plans for tomorrow in Chicago that I'll have to change.

NIKASStephanie: Can you do that?

NIKASSteve: Yes, but who is going to tell Birgit she doesn't get Dad cuddles tomorrow?

NIKASStephanie: Not me!

NIKASSteve: Coward! I suppose I can stay one more night in my suite here.

NIKASStephanie: But your friend left, right?

NIKASSteve: Yes.

NIKASStephanie: You'll live!

NIKASSteve: Possibly.

NIKASStephanie: Let me call Liesel and get the ball rolling. Late dinner?

NIKASSteve: Sure. I'll make reservations at Ruth's Chris for 9:00pm.

NIKASStephanie: Perfect.

NIKASSteve: Later.

NIKASStephanie: Later.

I minimized *adium* and picked up my mobile phone to call the twenty-four-hour number for Windy City Travel. I explained I needed another day and asked them to change the airline reservations. I let them know I'd contact Golden Gate Livery, and once they confirmed my flight for Monday afternoon at 3:00pm, I hung up, and used the house phone to call reception to extend my stay one night.

They accommodated me, as I knew they would, given I had a guarantee of a room due to my club status.

That out of the way, I called Kara to let her know I'd be staying another day, then used the VPN to connect to the office server so I could re-read the complaint from Cole, Nichols, and Smith. As I read, I made notes, then looked over the notes Liz had compiled from conversations with the support team. There was literally nothing I could see on which Cole, Nichols, and Smith could hang their hats, but given some of the claims were made under California law, there might be some nuance I was missing.

I checked to see if Nadia was online, but she wasn't, so I simply sent her a message that said I'd been delayed in California and would be in touch when I returned to Chicago. I was positive she'd be disappointed, but given the circumstances, there wasn't much choice, and business had to come first.

Just after 7:00am I dialed the number for Golden Gate Livery and arranged to change my car from Sunday to Monday, and set the pickup at the Cole, Nichols, and Smith office rather than the Mark Hopkins. Once that was confirmed, I hung up, and not two minutes later, my phone rang.

"Hi, it's Raven. Is there a problem?"

"No. Something came up with a customer, so I rescheduled for tomorrow."

"OK! The dispatcher simply sent a text to say the pickup was canceled. I'll call and make sure I get your ride tomorrow. Same thing?"

"No, the pickup is at the customer at noon."

"OK. I'll get the address from the dispatcher. See you in about twenty minutes."

"Great!"

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up. I brushed my teeth, gargled with Listerine, then shut down my computer. I called Housekeeping to have the room made up while I was at breakfast and they promised to take care of it. Once I hung up, I headed down to the lobby to wait for Raven, who arrived at 7:30am as promised.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

"I am. Where to?"

"How far can I go with teasing?"

"All the way," I chuckled. "Just say whatever smart ass thing popped into your head."

"In response to 'Ready to go?' I'd say, 'To your room and you eat me?'" she asked with a smirk.

"I'm sure it would be tasty, but to even consider it, there are pre-requisites."

"Wait! I was teasing, but you gave a serious answer?"

"Because you weren't *actually* teasing. By couching it as teasing, you gave me an out and left yourself an out if it fell flat, or if I took it seriously and you weren't serious."

"Are you always this difficult?" Raven asked, sounding slightly exasperated.

"Usually more!" I chuckled.

"OK, I'll play along. What pre-requisites?"

"A recent clean STI test is mandatory, as it's a condition of my freedom to manage my life as I see fit, which includes 'hooking up', as you called it. And that's true no matter how much or how little experience you might have. Let's go have breakfast, because my room is being made up now. We can continue the conversation if you want to."

"If you're OK with going across the bay, Fred's Coffee Shop in Sausalito is my favorite place. I've eaten there at least once a week for four years, and my family has gone there since I was little. It'll take about twenty-five minutes."

"I'm game," I replied. "It's been some time since I've been on the Golden Gate Bridge."

"When was the last time?"

"1972! About eight years before you were born!"

"And you're so ancient at thirty-nine?"

"No, just pointing out how long ago it was!"

"You can ride up front," she said.

"Thanks."

We got into the car and she pulled out of the parking court and turned onto California Street to head for Van Ness, which would take us toward the Golden Gate Bridge.

"I have to ask -- if someone has no experience, why would they need an STI test?"

"Several reasons. First, anyone born before about 1986 might have been exposed to HIV without knowing it. Second, there are other ways to contract STIs, even if it's improbable. Third, people aren't always honest. My legal wife is a nationally renowned trauma surgeon at University of Chicago Hospital and she set the mandatory rule."

"You know, you didn't mention what the other wives and moms do. You told me what the girlfriends do."

"Kara, the Senior Wife, is a tenured professor in chemistry at the University of Chicago and is one of the leading experts in academia on polymer chemistry, and works closely with researchers at Stanford; she's the mother of Birgit and Stephanie. Suzanne is in college, and plans to go to law school. Jennifer, that's Jesse's mom, has a Master's in electrical engineering and works for a test equipment design and manufacturing firm; her spouse is a civil engineer who works for the City of Evanston. Elyse, the mother of Matthew and Michael, has a Master's in Finance and is my company CFO. Jessica's kids are Albert and Ashley."

"Crazy! So have girls lied to you about it?"

"It has happened, with certain extenuating circumstances, but given my views about sex, omissions aren't lies, nor is declining to answer. For some girls, virginity is a big deal, for others, it isn't."

"Why do I get the impression from that statement that you've had your share of virgins?"

"I have," I replied. "But virginity is more a state of mind than anything. Sure, a physical act changes your state, but really, in the end, it's purely self-perception."

"Interesting. Can you explain further?"

"In the obvious, most common case, vaginal intercourse is the act of transition. But, pray tell, how does a gay man or lesbian lose their virginity? Or, perhaps more relevant, if a heterosexual couple engaged in mutual oral sex, are they still virgins? And what about anal sex?"

Raven was quiet for a moment, then nodded, "I get it. I'm not sure what the answer is for gays or lesbians."

"Neither am I, which is why I said it's self-perception. Nobody can define it for you except you. Another thing to think about -- is a girl who is raped a virgin?"

"Uhm, obviously not, right?"

"Rape is an act of violence, not sex. She hasn't had sex; she's been assaulted."

"That's a very interesting take. I'm going to assume you have a friend or relative who was raped and you've discussed it?"

"My best friend in High School, who is now Doctor Bethany Krajick, wrote a book titled *Why Me? A Woman's Guide to Surviving Sexual Abuse, Rape, and Incest*. She was raped at thirteen, which was about a year before I met her. I helped her through her counseling and recovery, and learned the true nature of rape."

"I've learned more from you in the past ten minutes than any other ten minutes in my entire life!"

"Age and experience have their value," I replied with a grin.

Raven laughed, "One more time -- I don't think you're old!"

"I'm going to guess from context that your dad is about five years older than I am, but your mom is roughly the same age as I am, at least as the story went."

Raven nodded, "You have a good memory, and yes, my dad is forty-five."

"Mine is eighty-five."

"Wow! You're the youngest?"

"Eldest. He didn't marry until he was forty-four; Mom was twenty-five."

"Single until then?"

"Yes. He served in the Navy during World War II, then worked for the OSS and CIA. He met my mom right after he left the CIA."

"An agent?"

"Yes. In Cuba, of all places. He left when Castro overthrew Batista."

"My family is pretty boring by comparison. To continue our conversation, in this hypothetical future, what other pre-requisites?"

"My wives are entitled to any details, and reporting is mandatory."

"Including ratings?" Raven asked.

I chuckled, "No. My personal policy is to not compare."

"How can you not?"

"I don't do so intentionally and I never vocalize the unintentional comparisons. Also, overnight stays require advance approval from my wives. There also used

to be a requirement that I use rubbers, but that went away once I had a vasectomy after my youngest daughter was born."

"I still find it strange that you're allowed to hook up."

"My situation is unique in my experience. I don't know anyone else with the kind of relationships I have or the freedom I have."

"So what happens to the girls who you hook up with?" Raven inquired.

"Many become mentees, some work for me, some are close friends, some attend my Philosophy Club, and others are disciples, if you will, spreading my special brand of subversiveness."

"I have to ask, what's so special about you?"

"I think I'll turn that around and ask why you decided to ask me to have lunch and breakfast, and to get to know me better?"

"I've never met anyone like you, and there was just something about you that I can't explain. Just a feeling, but I can't put my finger on what or why."

"A vibe?"

"Yeah, that would be a good word. Plus, your eyes, they just seem to draw me in. Add in the interesting conversation and I couldn't not."

"And what did you hope to gain?" I asked.

"I actually have no idea," Raven said as she pulled into the parking lot for Fred's Coffee Shop. "I'm curious about your motives."

"Honestly? I had the time to kill and I always like to meet new people. Friends and contacts are the key to happiness in my personal life and success in business."

"And it gets you laid."

I chuckled, "That, too. And I thought it was possible that's what you wanted, but the ball was totally in your court because, believe it or not, I don't pursue."

"I call bullshit!"

"You've done that a few times and been wrong every time! I've pursued exactly one girl in my entire life, and that's Kara, my Senior Wife."

"No way!" Raven protested. "Just no way!"

"Who made the first move?" I asked.

"I suppose you want me to say that I did."

"What I want you to say is the truth, or at least your perception of it. Should we go inside?"

We got out of the car and walked into the restaurant, and were told we had a fifteen-minute wait. It was nice enough to stand outside, so we did that, away from the small gaggle of others waiting on a table.

"As you ponder the answer to my question about the first move, consider that how it usually begins is a smart ass comment like the one you made earlier."

"But you were referring to Wednesday, right?"

"Was I? Think it through."

She cocked her head, looked at me, then shook it, "I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"On Wednesday, you made the first move towards friendship of some kind by asking me to have lunch. Today, you made the first move towards a physical relationship."

"You're making some serious assumptions!"

"Not at all. Teasing or not, serious or not, it *was* a step that way. And the thing is, even if you meant it simply as teasing with no intent, it changed the entire character of our interaction. And that's true whichever way this progresses. Do you agree you made both first moves, even if there was no intent?"

"You've backed me into a corner from which there is no real escape except to agree with you."

"You could refuse to accept it," I said. "After all, your perception is true for you."

"But if I refuse to accept it, we'll have breakfast, and after I take you back to the hotel, I won't see you again."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because that's the feeling I get from you -- that you expect honesty, even if it's embarrassing or self-deprecating."

"That's true."

"So refusing to acknowledge you're correct would be the end."

"Would it?"

"Are you messing with me?" Raven asked.

"Do you want an honest answer?"

"I think I have to say 'yes'."

"This is what I call a mindfuck. The goal is to tie you up in knots mentally to get you to see the world in a new way, because reality is not what you perceive it to be."

"And you said you weren't a cult leader!"

I laughed, "Only if you consider a mix of Skepticism, Buddhism, Zen, Shōtōkan, and the Socratic method a 'cult'. Remember when I mentioned being subversive? That means getting people to see the world for what it really is, as opposed to what they've been conditioned to believe it is. We have not, despite what you've been told, 'always been at war with East Asia'."

"That's Orwell, right?"

"Yes. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*."

"You're working awfully hard for someone who doesn't pursue!"

"If you believe that, you've missed the entire point," I said flatly.

"Whoa! Why the sudden change in demeanor?"

"You tell me," I said.

"You have me completely off balance and twisted in knots."

"Yes."

"What you called a mindf...that."

"If you can't say it, you can't do it!"

"I missed something, obviously."

"Darmok," I replied.

"Huh? Is that Chinese or Japanese? Or Greek?"

"Good guesses from context, but no, it's from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The episode is about a race that communicates by metaphor. My kids and my closest friends use movie and television quotes as a shorthand. The one I used was from *Risky Business* and it's actually good philosophy -- saying things out loud is powerful. Think back to what you said about me wanting unvarnished truth."

"I can't even think straight!"

"That's the first step. The final step is when you have ultimate clarity of thought."

"Do you?"

"No, and I won't in this lifetime!"

"Reincarnation?"

"Is as valid as any other answer about what happens to our consciousness or spirit or soul or *Atman* after we die. I'm agnostic, but I am convinced that there is far more to consciousness than we understand and the myths proffered by religions are attempts to explain that, though usually with ridiculous baggage about sexuality and relationships."

Raven's name was called and unfortunately, we were seated at what amounted to a communal table. That limited the conversation to more mundane topics. The food was good, and relatively inexpensive, especially for the Bay Area, and about forty minutes after we'd sat down, we left the restaurant.

"Sorry about the seating," Raven said after we got into the car. "I didn't think we'd have a conversation as deep as the one we had on the drive over."

"It's OK."

"What are you doing for the rest of the day, if it's OK to ask?"

"It's always OK to ask any question. If I'm able to answer, I will; if I don't know the answer, I'll say so; if I'm unable to answer for some reason, I'll tell you. It is literally impossible for you to offend me except by lying or being untrustworthy. The answer to your question is I'm having dinner with my sister and a pair of lawyers at 9:00pm. They're flying out for an emergency client meeting tomorrow morning."

"Do they need to be picked up at the airport?"

"We use Windy City Travel, a full-service travel agency with round-the-clock service, and I'm reasonably certain they'll call your firm to make the arrangements."

"What about in the morning?"

"Our meeting is at 8:00am, and we'll have four people."

"We can accommodate. If you give me the details, we'll have a minivan at the Mark Hopkins whenever you need."

"Their offices are on Fremont, so let's say 7:40am?"

"That sounds about right," Raven confirmed. "Hang on, and I'll make the arrangements."

She used a handheld radio to call her dispatcher and gave the details. Once they confirmed the pickup, she put the radio on the seat between us.

"All set," she said. "I'm free for the rest of the day."

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"An interesting question after the conversation before breakfast. I know how this is going to sound, but I'm going to ask anyway -- why aren't rubbers sufficient for STDs?"

"A host of reasons," I replied. "Any exchange of bodily fluid can transmit STDs, and, among other things, a throat infection of chlamydia is entirely possible. I think you can work out for yourself how that could happen."

Raven laughed, "Obviously."

"Basically, condoms are effective, but not effective enough to take the risk. You'd also need dental dams or other protective measures if you wanted to engage in oral sex. Kissing is generally safe, though it is theoretically possible to contract an STD via kissing if you happen to have an open sore in your mouth.

"Fundamentally, the only completely safe sex is between two monogamous individuals who have never been with anyone else, have never had an invasive medical procedure, never had a blood transfusion, and never used IV drugs. That's an extreme position, but it's also true. I'm actually surprised you aren't better informed, given you live in San Francisco."

"We actually live across the Bay, but most of the focus on STDs here is with AIDS, and that's mostly in the gay community. I know it's not only there, but that's the focus. And sex ed in school was pretty lame."

"Same here, though mine was before HIV and AIDS were known. I was in eighth grade in '76 and '77, and the big worry was herpes, though obviously the other STDs, which we called VD, existed. I think the first time I heard about what we now call AIDS was when it was called GRID in the early 80s, before HIV was isolated and identified."

"Are you a polymath?"

"If so, not anywhere close to Leonardo da Vinci, who made significant discoveries in anatomy, civil engineering, hydrodynamics, geology, optics, and other areas. Sadly, he didn't publish his findings, so they had little direct influence on subsequent scientific and technological advances. I know a little about a lot, and a lot about a little, mostly technology and Shōtōkan karate."

"It seems like you know a lot about a lot."

"As bad as this sounds to say, that's because the average person in the US is poorly educated and largely uninformed. I see the difference between my kids and their friends and the average student, and it's night and day. I don't think my kids are necessarily any smarter than their peers, but they've been taught how to think, to analyze, and to be skeptical, all of which are anathema to the

government and the education cabal, who want compliant, obedient workers and taxpayers."

"And cynical, too!"

"Just observation," I replied as we began crossing the Golden Gate Bridge back into San Francisco.

"Is there anything specific you want to do?" Raven asked.

"Not really," I replied. "I've done all the touristy things in San Francisco and hadn't planned to be here past this morning."

"How about a walk along the Embarcadero and you can see the new sculpture in Rincon Park -- *Cupid's Span*. We could have lunch at Fisherman's Wharf, unless there's something else you want to eat."

"Don't you mean 'someone else'?" I asked with a grin.

"Why do I have the feeling that no matter what I'd said, or how I answer that, you're going to tie me up in knots?"

"Only if you like that kind of thing," I chuckled.

Raven laughed, "As I said!"

"I've noted in the past that there is almost nothing that can be said in English that can't be twisted to refer to sex! I'll give you an example. Are you a hockey fan?"

"Dad has season tickets for the Sharks. He's originally from New York and his dad was a big Rangers fan. I go to games with him occasionally, though usually he takes his best friend."

"OK, so think about this sequence -- forecheck, hip check, backcheck, body check, and poke check, then score from the slot!"

Raven laughed hard, "You are bad!"

"It gets worse -- go behind the goal and stuff it in the back door!"

She laughed hard again, "I'll never think of hockey commentary the same way!"

"Or, just crash the net, shoot, and score? Or twitch the twine?"

"Did you come up with all of that?"

"Together with a young woman in Pittsburgh who was flirting."

"And did you?" Raven asked.

"I don't kiss and tell."

"Yes you do! Your wives!"

"OK, yes, as the price of freedom. But that's it. Do people see things and make inferences? Yes. But that's different from me bragging or whatever you might call it. I had the reputation in High School of never, ever talking about it; the girls, on the other hand, told their friends, who told their friends, and so on."

"Why do I get the idea you had a LOT of fun in High School?"

"Because I did! There was heartache and tragedy, but I did have a lot of fun."

"Tragedy?"

"The death of someone my age who was very close. And there was also an attempted suicide, alcohol abuse, an abusive mom, and a bunch of other bad stuff. But I also spent a year in Sweden as an exchange student, started my own company, and dated quite a few girls."

"High School was pretty boring for me. I mostly hung out with friends, dated a bit, but found teenage boys to pretty much be jerks."

"A not uncommon lament amongst teenage girls. My boys are very mature; much more than I was, that's for sure. Fortunately, I had friends who could set me straight; unfortunately, I didn't always listen to them."

"So you grew up, so to speak?"

"There are young women who would maintain that hasn't happened yet," I chuckled. "Two of them will be here tonight -- my sister and our in-house legal counsel. My sister is the company CEO."

"She started the company with you?"

"No, she came along later, after she received her MBA and had a few years' experience at a major accounting firm. Before that, I split the CEO duties with my friend Julia."

"It's all women? You said your CFO was the mother to two of your kids, right?"

"Yes. All our executives are female, and we actually have more women in technical positions than men. And our long-term receptionist is a guy."

"Do you do anything the normal way?"

"I do things the *right* way," I countered.

"In your opinion, obviously."

I shrugged, "What I do stands up to scrutiny and analysis, even if it doesn't conform to societal norms. That has landed me in hot water many times, but each and every time I've come out of it being proven right, or at least not being wrong."

"Aren't those the same thing?"

"It depends. I can give an answer that is not wrong, but is incomplete or speculative. Think about how science works -- you formulate a hypothesis and then try to prove it wrong. But, just because you can't prove it wrong doesn't make it right. You might not know the right test, the tests might not be accurate enough, or your hypothesis may be lacking in some way."

"Having a conversation with you is challenging!"

"As I said before, this is what I call a 'mindfuck'. I *could* have what you consider a 'normal' conversation, but I prefer to challenge people and push them outside their comfort areas and to make them think."

"Does it always work?"

"That depends on what you mean by 'work'. If you mean get them to see there are other ways to think? Yes, usually. If you mean 'convert them', then no. And there are people who are immune, but that's usually because of religious or political indoctrination. Their minds are so firmly closed they can't imagine there is any other way to think or to perceive reality. Those 'true believers' are the most dangerous people around, because their goal is to force everyone to think the

way they do and live in *their* perceived reality. It's a recipe for totalitarianism, be it from the left or the right."

Raven parked the car near the Ferry Building, we got out, and began walking along the Embarcadero heading towards Rincon Park, which was the opposite direction from Fisherman's Wharf, meaning we'd need to retrace our steps.

"Do you frustrate people?" Raven asked.

"All the time! I've been called the 'most frustrating man on the planet' by several woman close to me, including Kara. What has you frustrated?"

"Everything about you! You pick apart everything I say, and I can't complain that you're wrong, even if I don't see things your way."

"Hence my comments before about perception being reality for each individual, and that not being wrong doesn't make me right."

"Worse," Raven groused, "I know what you want, you know what you want, and yet you haven't even flirted!"

"You *think* you know what I want," I replied. "Those two things are different. Heck, even I don't know what I want, even if I think I do!"

"Wait!" Raven protested in exasperation. "What?!"

"I'm as skeptical about my own motives and my own thinking as I am about anyone else's. But that's a much deeper conversation for which you're not ready. As for what I want, it's a friend who is a potential future subversive. Let me speculate -- you think I want to be intimate, right?"

"I think that's obvious from the vibe you give off."

"And you'd be right, *if* you defined intimacy correctly, which I am reasonably certain you do not."

"My head is about to explode!" Raven exclaimed. "What now?!"

"True intimacy is a connection of souls or spirits or *Atman*, not bodies. What you call 'intimate' is a sign or symptom of true intimacy, though it can be completely disconnected from it as well."

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"That true intimacy is spiritual or intellectual, not physical. To use a vulgar term, you can fuck without being intimate, and you can be intimate without fucking. They have no necessary relationship. Both are best *together*, with the physical joining coming *after* the intellectual or spiritual joining. Or, as has been said, the 'mindfuck' comes before the physical fuck. Or, if you want to put it in less vulgar terms, the mind meld comes before the physical meld.

"To take it even further, romantic love has nothing to do with it, and is often the source of problems. Sadly, English is a poor language with regard to expressing love, because you can love your dog, love chocolate, love hockey, love sex, love your kids, love your friends, and love your spouse. One word serves too many purposes, and that devalues it.

"Greek is better, with three basic kinds of love, the most important of which is «agápē», which means self-giving, self-sacrificing love. The other two main ones are «philia», meaning brotherly love, and «érōs» meaning erotic or sexual love, or sometimes romantic love. True intimacy is only possible at the «agápē» level, and that's a decision, not a feeling.

"For completeness, the other ones are «Storge», which is the love found between parents and children, or close family members; «Pragma», which is love founded on duty and reason, and one's longer-term interests; «Philautia» which is love of self, which can be healthy or unhealthy; unhealthy if one places oneself above others, and healthy if used to build self-esteem and confidence."

"I am so far out of my league here!"

"No, you aren't," I replied. "I deduce you are an intelligent, thoughtful, respectful, and dutiful young woman. What you are is uneducated and you haven't been exposed to this kind of thinking. You're getting the Master's level course, if you will. Sadly, this kind of critical thinking was part of what was called a 'classical education' which has fallen out of favor to teaching to standardized tests plus indoctrination. I have a strategy to move forward, if you're open to it."

"You had me at 'chauffeuse'!" Raven declared. "You know it, I know it, and we're just dancing around it."

"Are we?" I asked.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Raven exclaimed, now totally exasperated "Seriously?!"

"Yes, seriously. If what you said is true, then we *aren't* dancing around it. Our entire interaction has been *foreplay*."

Raven stopped dead in her tracks, which took me one step to realize, so I stopped and turned to face her.

"How do you do that?" she asked, bewildered.

"What?"

"Turn everything upside down with a single comment!"

"I've been having deep, philosophical conversations with my friends for more than twenty years. I explained about our Philosophy Club, and these are the kinds of things we discuss. What I didn't tell you is that my eldest son and eldest daughter have what they call their 'Hangout' which is their version of my Philosophy Club. They're all in High School, though they do have some college kids who attend on occasion. They discuss the same topics, in the same ways. In fact, we'll have some graduates, if you will, from their Hangouts to my Philosophy Club in January."

"And they do that because you taught them?"

"They learned from me, their moms, and some other key adults. The entire point is self-discovery, self-improvement, and ultimately, societal change. But we can't compete with the fear mongering, mass hysteria, and outright bribery used to control the population, so we do it one person at a time. That's why I call us subversives -- we work in the shadows against the system, hoping to change the narrative."

"Can this get any stranger?" Raven asked.

I chuckled, "Don't ever ask that question because Loki has a way of ensuring it does!"

"So, when you said strategy before, it wasn't about sex, was it?"

"No. I was going to suggest you read *Stranger in a Strange Land*, where you'll find many of the concepts that have blown your mind today addressed. That's usually the first book I recommend to anyone who is a putative subversive. After

that, it's up to you what happens -- you have a choice of the red pill or the blue pill."

"*The Matrix*, right?" Raven asked.

"Yes. Your next choice is vital, because 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."

"In your mind, does the red pill end up with us in bed together?"

"It might, if you want it to, though it's contingent on the prerequisites I mentioned earlier. But it's not a requirement by any means. Let's see the sculpture, walk to Fisherman's Wharf, and have lunch. That will give you time to think about it and decide which way you want this to go."

LXV. The Mindfuck Continues

December 22, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

"Red pill," Raven said when we finished our lunch at Fisherman's Wharf. "I don't really have a choice."

"We always have choices," I replied. "The goal is to always make the optimal choice."

"I meant, logically. You basically backed me into a corner, and I'm positive that any counterargument I tried would fail."

"It is possible for a conclusion to be both logical and wrong. Logic is about methods and consistency, not about 'rightness' or 'wrongness'."

"You have a very strange way of seducing a girl!"

"Actually, if you think about what I've said to you, the seduction is complete, and we've already accomplished my goal."

"You mean deciding to be one of your subversives?"

"That is the *true* point of the 'red pill or blue pill' question. Remember the quote from *The Matrix* -- it's absolutely about seduction, but not about sex."

Raven was quiet for a moment, then nodded.

"I'm going to ask two questions, and I'd like a plain 'yes' or 'no' answer. No caveats, no mind gam...mindfucks."

"Go on," I replied with a smile.

"Was this morning really just about philosophy?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to go to bed with me?"

"Yes."

"Now say what you would have said if I hadn't demanded one-word answers.

"To the first, my response would have been 'you tell me'; to the second, 'you already know the answer or you would not have asked the question'."

"Hang on! You're saying if I thought the answer was 'no', I wouldn't have asked?"

"Correct. Do you think *any* girl wants to hear a guy she wants to sleep with say he's not interested? It's better for your self-esteem to just not ask, or to wait to see if he asks. People don't want to be shot down. Think about guys at school dances in Junior High."

Raven laughed softly, "They'd rather stand against the wall than have a girl say 'no' to them."

"Now, think about a guy proposing -- don't you think he knows the answer before he asks? Or at least believes he does?"

Raven considered that for a moment, "Because if he was sure she'd say 'no', or thought there was a strong possibility she might, he wouldn't ask."

"Correct. So, you only asked because you already knew the answer. And you knew the answer to the first one, too, because I told you. You asked because you didn't believe what I said earlier."

Raven frowned, "How do you do that? I mean, read people so well?"

"My friends who lose money to me at the poker table ask that question all the time!"

"I bet you're really good!"

"I am, and I'm an excellent poker player, too!"

Raven laughed, which had been my goal after her frown.

"You probably won't give me a straight answer, but have you been with more than fifty girls?"

"Yes."

"More than a hundred?"

"Rather than play twenty questions, it's over two hundred."

"Jesus!" Raven gasped. "And you were telling the truth about not chasing?"

"Tell me what happened since we spoke on Wednesday," I said with a smile.

"All you did was ask questions and make me think. Well, and those eyes!"

"As I said earlier, the mindfuck is the most important thing, and it's entirely possible to be kindred spirits without physical joining. The physical part is simply a symbol of the intellectual and spiritual part. If you ask society, it's meaningless; if you understand it, it's the most meaningful sex you can ever have."

"Not with your spouse?"

"Think that through, please."

"You'd never marry someone, or multiple someones, if you didn't have that intellectual and spiritual connection. They're subversives first, lovers second."

"You're learning."

"I'm going to guess you know I'm a virgin."

"Something which both matters and doesn't matter. Tell me why."

"To you or to me?"

"Yes."

"Whoever said you were the most frustrating man on the planet was understating things! I'd say in the entire universe!"

"I gave you the answer earlier, or at least the clues for most of it."

"You said it was largely a state of mind, and that it mattered to some but not to others. If I was saving myself for marriage, then I wouldn't do it, so, in that sense,

it doesn't matter. It does matter because it's...a rite of passage from being a child to being an adult."

"Very, very good."

"For you...I have an idea, but I have to ask a question."

"Go ahead."

"Have most of those girls been virgins?"

"A large majority, yes."

"It matters because you can teach them what you believe is the true meaning of sex; it doesn't matter because you don't feel girls who have had sex are damaged goods the way some people think."

"You made several good inferences and deductions. Remember what I said about being smart?"

"That I was uneducated and even though you didn't say it directly, naïve."

"And, after what amounted to a four-hour mindfuck, you've now realized that things are NOT as you had perceived them before you met me, which is the entire point."

"What I said before about learning more in ten minutes than in any other ten minutes in my life is not just true, but I'd say the same about the last five hours."

"There is one potential impediment."

"OK, smart guy! Is there?"

I laughed, and nodded, "You wouldn't have asked your second yes-or-no question if you hadn't met the prerequisites."

"Wouldn't that be the very definition of a 'prick tease'?"

"For most guys, probably; for me, no, because of my views about consent and any agreement to have sex."

"Before I respond, I'm guessing you need to see the test results?"

"That is the rule."

"That means driving back across the bridge, stopping at my house for a moment, then back to your hotel, because I sure can't take you to my room!"

"We'd still have about five hours," I replied.

"From what I hear, five minutes is enough...at least for the main act."

"Prepare to have your mind blown," I replied.

"I'd ask, but I think I'll wait to see."

We quickly walked back to her car and headed back for the Golden Gate Bridge.

"I don't think I can draw any conclusions about consent from anything you've said so far," Raven said once we were on the Bridge.

"Consent has to be positive, that is, you have to agree to have sex, not just 'let it happen', and consent can be withdrawn at any point, obligating the other person to stop. And nobody can ever commit irrevocably to sex."

"Married couples?"

"Anyone. And I'm not talking about what any law says, or any religious leader. Every individual has the right to say 'no' in any circumstance, and nobody has the right to demand sex, or use coercion to get it."

"So much for High School boys!" Raven declared.

"That was a common lament from girls I knew in High School. I made my share of errors, the most egregious being intentionally manipulating a girl into it, and another where things simply got out of control."

"I thought you said you only chased your wife...or is that the one you manipulated? And didn't you manipulate me?"

"Let's take that last one first -- did I?"

Raven thought for a moment, then said, "I think some people would say you did, but if you're telling the truth, and I think you are, the manipulation was to simply get me to think differently. Once I did, everything else followed logically. Well, no, THAT followed logically. I'm still confused about pretty much everything else."

"That's normal," I replied. "For the one that got out of hand, we were making out and things got hot and heavy, progressed as they normally do, and afterwards she made it clear she had done something she hadn't wanted to do."

"Then why do it?"

"Hormones, and a very experienced partner who knew how to make her hot and bothered. That situation taught me to ensure I had positive consent, rather than

just assuming that not saying 'no' is consent. It's implied consent, in that I didn't rape her, but she felt taken advantage of. That's what led to what was called 'talking girls to death' before sex, which evolved into the mindfuck.

"The other one is probably the biggest regret and reflects very poorly on me. My High School girlfriend and I set out to manipulate a girl from a rival school who had a reputation as a real bitch into sleeping with me. It worked, but in the process, I fell in love with her, and pulled back on the reins, despite her demands that I have sex with her."

"And you think that wasn't chasing?"

"The origins are a bit more complicated than that, but I didn't want to detract from my admission of error or seem as if I was justifying bad behavior. Ultimately, though, she chased me for years, through all manner of emotional events, both between us and in our lives, until finally, circumstances arose where we could repair the friendship. But even that is complicated because of a number of things that happened between us that my girlfriend from High School would call manipulative on the girl's part."

"Let me get this straight -- your girlfriend wanted you to have sex with another girl?"

"Yes, and it's complicated, but it's also the case that other girls have encouraged me to have new partners, to the point of bringing them to me, and that includes one of my wives."

"No way!"

"It's true, to the point that she's even watched me deflower girls and gets off on it."

"This just gets crazier by the minute!"

"You chose to stay in Wonderland and have me show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes! That said, you are free to change your mind and simply take me back to the Mark Hopkins."

"You give up that easily?"

"This only works if you exercise your free will and choose to do it. Coercion of any sort is unacceptable. And I haven't given up. If you change your mind, you'll tell me why, I'll ask questions, and you'll synthesize a new philosophical position, and decide what's in your best interest. Then do that."

"You're that confident?"

"Yes. Once you decided to see just how deep the rabbit hole goes, there is no way your curiosity would allow you to stop at this point."

"You read people that well?"

"Tell me I'm wrong."

"I can't."

My personal phone rang, and I slipped it from my pocket, but didn't recognize the number on the screen, except that it was area code 815. That made me believe it was Nadia returning my call, and I debated if I should allow the call to go to voicemail.

"Mind if I answer this?"

"I don't mind."

I flipped open the phone and said, "Steve Adams."

"Hi, it's Nadia. I got your IM, and you weren't online, so I used the phone number you left. What happened?"

"A client crisis and my attorneys say I need to meet with them. It's a client here in San Francisco, and because I'm here, I'm staying until tomorrow. I'm really sorry. How about the 27th? Same place but at 5:30pm?"

"Yes, see you at the Spaghetti Factory on Ogden at 5:30pm."

"See you then. "

We said 'goodbye', I closed the phone to disconnect the call and slipped it back into my pocket.

"Sorry about that."

"You obviously have a life beyond...whatever this is."

"This is what you make it to be," I replied. "With a few limitations, you define the terms of the relationship. You need to decide what you want from it, articulate that, and then act in a way to achieve your goal."

"Don't you have a say?"

"Yes, of course, but once I agreed to accept you as a member of my subversive band, I committed to being your friend, mentor, guide, and, at least today, lover. It's what YOU do that defines your life and the terms of our relationship. You are, as they say, free in a way you never were before."

"How so?"

"You no longer see the world the way others want you to see it. Granted, you could, in the end, reject everything I've said, and pretend as if you took the blue pill, but there will always be tension, and there is no way to retreat to your life before you met me."

"This is so weird," Raven said, shaking her head. "All from asking questions?"

"There's a reason troublemakers like Socrates and Jesus are executed by the authorities!"

"Wait! How can you compare them?!"

"Same methods, same style, same results. For my purposes, I can ignore the religious component of Jesus' message, because it's immaterial to my point. What happened to both of them is the same thing that happens, to varying degrees, to anyone who speaks truth to power.

"I guess I hadn't considered comparing those two because I'm Catholic."

"Me too, but I got better!" I chuckled.

"Why do I feel I should know that?"

"It's 'Monty Python' and has to do with the statement that someone had been turned into a newt."

"That's why. My dad is a huge Monty Python fan; I just never found it all that funny. When did you stop going to church?"

"Age fourteen," I replied. "I couldn't reconcile enjoying sex with the love of my life with Catholic teaching. From that, I discovered other problems with their worldview and reject it utterly and completely."

"Fourteen?! Holy crap! What would say if your kids had sex at fourteen?!"

"I think you can work that out for everything I've said."

"You'd be OK with it?! Seriously?"

"Let me ask you this question -- do you think parents can prevent a kid who wants to have sex from having sex?"

"You expect me to say 'no', don't you?"

"If that's what you believe, or what you've concluded, then yes, I do. Otherwise, no. I want you to be honest about what you're thinking, then defend it against Socratic inquiry."

"I'll lose!"

"Which is exactly why they executed Socrates!" I chuckled. "The point being, if your ideas or beliefs cannot withstand challenge, and you maintain them anyway, you're simply deluding yourself and live in a solipsistic fantasy world."

"You lost me," Raven said.

"Solipsism is the principle that nothing outside your own mind can be known to exist, and that the external world and other minds cannot be known and might not even exist outside your own mind. It's a legitimate philosophical position, and one I hold, but if you refuse to acknowledge criticisms of your own belief, it's a fantasy world where all that matters is how you feel about something.

"It is, in the end, narcissistic - self-centered preoccupation with yourself and your desires, at the expense of others. In other words, something is true because you *want* it to be true, not because it has been rigorously examined and tested. Skepticism is a defense against narcissism and prevents solipsism from creating an air superiority.

"If you studied philosophy in High School, you'll recall that in *Republic*, Plato wrote, 'I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing'. And if you think about our entire conversation, I haven't tried to convince you to believe anything specific, only to question everything and assume anything you know is questionable."

Raven was quiet for a few minutes, during which we reached her house. She parked, went inside, and returned about four minutes later.

"Third degree from my mom," she said.

"I'm curious as to what you said?"

"That I'd made a new friend, that we were going to hang out, and I wanted to get my portable music player so."

"Apple iPod?" I asked.

"Yes. It was the only excuse I could think of for needing to go to my room. It's not as if I could tell her about the STD test!"

"To go back to your question earlier, my teenagers all have regular STI tests."

"Hang on! You know?!"

"As I think you can surmise, I don't control my kids. They are free to manage their lives as they see fit, which includes having sex, or even having overnight stays. They have to be responsible, but we've taught them about responsibility and good decision making from the time they were little."

"Right, because teenagers are great decision makers!"

"Adults are no better," I replied. "They have more experience, but that doesn't prevent them from making bad, sometimes life-shattering, mistakes. But I'll happily compare my kids to any adult you can point to, and show that, in general, they make decisions which are at least as good, and in many cases, better."

"Society has its head up its ass with regard to raising children, especially teens. And the errors of my generation are going to create kids who are unable to manage their own lives as adults, which will lead directly to authoritarianism and totalitarianism, when they demand someone tell them what to do and protect them from all negative outcomes. The only way to counter that trend I've discovered is subversiveness, and it may be a lost cause."

"If you think that, then why work so hard at it?"

"The alternative is to lie down and be trampled by the mob which stampedes from one moral panic to the next, and demands that their liberty be taken away for the mere promise of security, which is never delivered, and can never be delivered in the way they mean it."

"How do you win?"

"When the next republic rises from the ashes of this one. Sadly, though, as Thomas Jefferson reminds us, governments accrete power and need to be overthrown on a regular basis to prevent them from taking away our liberties. As

he said -- *'For what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon & pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. It is it's natural manure'.*"

"Revolution?"

"Jefferson, like Leon Trotsky, believed in permanent revolution."

"The Communist?"

"Yes. Both were radical revolutionaries who felt that overarching bureaucracy, whether in a one-party or multi-party state, and whether elected or appointed, would betray the revolution. They were both right. And yes, both had serious faults, but that doesn't take away from their philosophical correctness."

"I swear, every five minutes it's like everything changes and takes on an even deeper meaning."

"Like the layers of an onion," I replied.

"Yes!" Raven agreed. "A perfect analogy. Can we go back to your suggestion about this being what I want it to be?"

"You can raise any points or ask any questions."

"What limitations?"

"There are various levels of relationship, and people move in and out of them, depending on their needs, but, no matter what, there won't be another wife."

"But girlfriends are OK?"

"It depends on what you mean by that. With regard to the two young women who live with us, they are committed and exclusive, but time-limited. One will be going to graduate school in Russia and the other returning to Japan."

"They can't fool around, but you can? How is that fair?!"

"Please don't use that word," I replied. "It almost always implies not getting what you want, rather than not receiving a just share or just result."

"What do you mean?"

"The usual claim that something is 'not fair' is about not liking the result, not about whether it is deserved, equitable, or just. In our house, 'fair' is the four-letter 'F' word that gets the kids in trouble! They can say 'fuck off' to me, and they have. But if they say 'not fair', they'll nearly always be met with me demonstrating life isn't 'fair'. They learned pretty quickly. And I bet you agree, even if you don't know it. Think about the typical whiny 'not fair' claim."

"You mean kids who didn't get what they wanted, right?"

"Yes, and it's not limited to kids! Going back to your objection, there is literally nothing preventing my wives or girlfriends from taking other lovers except their own choices. For my two girlfriends, one stopped seeing me for a time when she had a steady boyfriend, but after they broke up, she chose to resume an exclusive, for her, relationship with me. But she, like the others, is free to manage her sex life as she sees fit. For her, that's being exclusive with me. It was not a requirement I imposed."

"It doesn't make sense to me," Raven declared.

"It doesn't have to! That's another component of my philosophy -- everyone does what's in their own best interest, and is free to arrange their life as they best see fit. The key is, that what's in my best interest, or yours, or anyone's, has to include how it affects others. In other words, I won't do anything that is detrimental to my family because it's not in my best interest to do so."

"A lot of people would say having sex with women who aren't your wives is detrimental to your family."

"They're entitled to their opinion, but nothing I'm doing hurts *them*, so my response to them would be that nobody is making them do it, and they're free to live their life as they want without my interference. My approval is no more necessary for their choices than theirs is for mine. And I'm going to put something out there, even though it might change things."

"What?"

"You're about to give your virginity to a married man," I said firmly. "If social approval or social validation is important to you, then you should drop me at the hotel and go home."

"What?!" Ravan exclaimed. "Why be mean about it?"

"You mistook a challenge for being 'mean'," I replied. "My point is, your objections to how others live their lives entitles others to object to how you live your life. It's either that, or a double standard which says anything you do is 'OK', but everyone else has to conform to your ideals. In other words, if you're going to condemn, prepare to be condemned."

"The Bible verses about not judging?"

"Which are actually a command not to hold a double standard. Stated plainly, it's hold yourself to the same standard to which you hold others. If you're going to object to my girlfriends' choices, or my wives' choices, then you can't, without being a hypocrite, fuck a married man, period."

Raven didn't respond, and I wondered if she was going to change her mind. That was the logical thing to do if she had a moral problem with having sex with me. What I didn't want was regret after the fact, something that had happened with Annie, and to some extent, Michelle, though Michelle's case was much more complicated.

Raven, similar to Michelle, was confronting the moral implications of her actions, though from a somewhat different perspective. In the end, what it came down to for them, and for everyone else for that matter, was deciding if their fealty to social moral norms was more important than self-fulfillment. And that was true of any person engaging in any activity that didn't harm someone not party to the means of that self-fulfillment.

After thirteen minutes of silence, which I was sure was uncomfortable for Raven, she pulled into the entrance court of the Mark Hopkins. She didn't pull into the spot reserved for car services, and my immediate thought was that she had decided against spending the afternoon together, but then I remembered she'd said she could only park there for an hour. I unbuckled my belt as a bellboy opened the car door.

"Wait a sec," Raven said as I began to get out of the car.

I had my feet out the door, but stopped and turned to face her.

"We have a permanent spot at the Freemont," she said. "I'll park and walk over. Wait in the lobby for me?"

"Sure," I agreed, reading nothing more into her statement than she wanted to talk.

I got out of the car, the bellboy closed the door, and Raven pulled away. I walked across the court, up the steps, and into the hotel lobby. Just over five minutes later, Raven came in through the doors.

"Let's take a walk," I suggested, feeling being in the room might pressure her, which I didn't want to do.

Raven nodded, and we left the hotel, and began walking east along California street.

"You have me so thoroughly confused I don't know which way is up," she said.

"That's a typical reaction to the mindfuck," I replied.

"But doesn't that seem like manipulation?"

"I understand why you would say that, but think about the order of events. When did you decide you wanted to go to bed with me? Be honest, please."

"In the car on the way to the hotel from the airport."

"And that's the usual sequence -- a girl decides she's interested, and a philosophical discuss on some sort ensues, and then we go to bed. Or, as I put it, the mindfuck comes before the physical fuck."

"So you never just hook up with someone without that?"

"I have, and I do, but those situations are actually becoming rare, and what's happened with you is more common. To be blunt and a bit crass, I could get laid as much as I want and as often as I want, but that's not actually the point."

"Creating your subversive cell, or whatever, and then, well, sealing the relationship by having sex."

"Yes. It's not a requirement, but it is a clear indication that someone has come over to the dark side, as it were. If their mind is truly free, they can have sex with a married man, even if they're virgins when we meet. In some ways, virgins are better."

"Because the symbol of virginity is so strong that it demonstrates a complete commitment."

"Yes. It's a symbolic act that is evidence that the girl no longer cares what her parents think or what her friends think or what society thinks, and that is the only way to be truly free. I do have a confession to make about that."

"What's that?"

"I also have a fetish for virgins, so the two work hand in hand."

Raven laughed, "You and every other guy on the planet!"

"Actually, I know quite a few who disagree, and I can even point to a famous one -- Benjamin Franklin. He said 'In all your Amours you should prefer old Women to young ones' and gave a number of reasons. Among them were that conversation is better because they are more worldly; there is no risk of children; they're more discreet and willing to have secret affairs; and that it's less of a sin, because deflowering a virgin might lead to her ruin. He also makes the point that

in the dark, all cats are grey, and that once a woman can't rely on beauty to attract men, she has to become interesting in other ways."

"And you can just reel those off?"

"I have a good memory for things like that. I also didn't include his last reason-- that they're grateful."

Raven shook her head, "Who knew he was a jerk?!"

"I prefer to say he was honest. His points aren't wrong, even if they might be offensive. That said, as with all generalizations, they fail in particular cases. Circumstances have also changed a bit, and the stigma of not being a virgin is gone in most parts of American society except certain overly religious folks. And the risk of babies is much smaller, given modern birth control, or in my case, a vasectomy. The conversation conundrum is solved by finding intelligent young women, and one of my female friends once commented that I only sleep with highly intelligent women."

"Me?"

"You. Education is not a sign of intelligence; I know plenty of people with college degrees who I think are, at best, of average intelligence. And intelligence isn't limited to academics. Does your dad have a college degree?"

"No."

"And yet he runs a successful business in the Bay Area that puts food on the table, provides a nice house, and so on. Not everyone could do that. Americans, and many Europeans, have an unhealthy fetish for college degrees. My sister's husband is a Master Carpenter, and does things I could never do, no matter how much I studied."

"I see your point, I just never thought about it, really."

"My critique of your thinking is this -- you fetishize a college degree when you and your family are successful without anyone having one. Why?"

Raven thought for a second, then smiled, "Because I've been conditioned to think that way."

"Bingo. You're never going to be able to look at the world in the same way again, even if you choose to comply with social demands for conformity. In other words, once the germ of subversion is transmitted, it affects everything you do. You can try to fight it, but that road leads only to despair. That said, everyone handles it differently, and that's OK. The key is not feeling constrained by your fellow citizens, nor constraining them, and sowing the seeds to subversion in whatever way you see fit."

"Why do I have this feeling that you don't care one way or the other about what happens next?"

"Because you're still subject to the old neural connections formed over the past twenty-two years. I want you to be quiet for five minutes while we walk, then we'll turn back towards the hotel, and you can formulate the correct thought, not the one from your old self."

We walked another five minutes, then turned back towards the Mark Hopkins.

"It's not that you don't care one way or the other," Raven said. "You said you wanted to, so I know you do. It's that you're willing to forgo having sex if I decide it's not in my best interest, and you don't want to put pressure on me."

"Better," I replied. "Much better. Next point to ponder -- have you thought about how you'll feel afterwards? I mean spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually."

"Not physically?" she asked.

I laughed, "Sorry, but I think that's covered. I mean, barring some anomalous anatomy!"

"You lost me."

"At twenty-two, the chances that you have an intact hymen are extremely low, especially if you've engaged in any kind of strenuous activity. The idea that all virgins bleed is an old wives' tale, though originally born of some truth when girls married much younger than they do now. And painful first intercourse is nearly always due to lack of foreplay and lubrication, something often overlooked in the back seat of a car. Again, there are some anatomical anomalies which can cause that, but they're rare."

"I've literally never heard any of that!"

"If your sex ed was anything like mine, that doesn't surprise me. You know I'm married to a doctor, but also, my best friend who wrote the book I mentioned about rape, also wrote a book, *Smart Teens; Smart Choices*, about teen sexuality that explains all of that, and more. And I can say from personal experience, that's all true."

"Part of the reason I didn't was fear that it would hurt," she replied. "So many of my friends said it did."

"And said friends had their first times parking, or in circumstances that required alacrity?"

"Did you swallow a thesaurus?"

"I've been effectively accused of that in the past," I chuckled.

"My mom said she bled."

"And she may have. I encountered a twenty-five-year-old with an intact hymen. It's rare, but it does happen. At eighteen, if she wasn't into sports, it's possible, though I would suspect it was more a pink stain on the sheets than a bright red spot, as most people imagine."

"She wasn't THAT detailed!" Raven exclaimed. "And I don't want those details!"

I laughed, "A common lament amongst most children, even adult children -- they do not even want to contemplate the idea that their parents even have sex, let alone enjoy it!"

"Let me guess, your kids aren't like that."

"Anecdotal story -- one of my new subversives was at the house, and as we made our way to the bedroom, my eleven-year-old daughter smirked and said 'bed her well!'"

"NO WAY!"

"And she's the quiet one!" I chuckled. "My eldest daughter would give me play-by-play details if I allowed her to."

"That's just weird!" Raven exclaimed.

"The public at large would agree with you. But our family is open about everything, including sex. And I'd say my kids are better adjusted than any other

kids you can point to, and the only ones who come close are the ones we call the 'cousins' who are the kids of our closest family friends. If you're ever in Chicago, you can meet them all."

"That would be weird, you know, meeting your wives after...never mind. Weird for ME, but normal for you, right?"

"In some instances, I've insisted that young women ask my wives for permission."

"Seriously? You tell a girl to get permission from your wives to have sex with you?"

"Yes. Overnight stays require permission, and while sometimes I'll ask, the current norm is for the girls to ask."

"And how much do you tell your wives?"

"As much as they want to know," I replied. "Usually they don't want details, but if they ask, I'll describe the encounter in as much detail as they want."

"And you'd do that with me? Tell them?"

"I have to tell them I was with you, but details would only be provided if they asked, and as I said, they usually don't. If a girl asked for privacy, I'll make a provisional promise to limit the details as much as possible, but if my wives insist, I have to tell. They usually honor the privacy request."

"I think I've said 'weird' or 'strange' more times in the last six hours than I have in the last six years!"

"That, too, is a typical reaction."

"I haven't changed my mind," Raven said. "Well, I went from being sure to being unsure back to being sure, but I never thought 'no'."

"And what do you expect from the next six hours?"

"Why do I have the feeling that's a loaded question?"

"It all depends on your perception of sex," I replied. "You made the comment about it taking five minutes, with the implication we'd do it once and that would be it."

"I, uhm, only have what friends say and -- this is going to sound bad -- TV and movies to go by. None of my close friends are married or even live with their boyfriends."

"My comment about TV and movies is to believe about ten percent of what you see, and none of what you hear! And that goes for the news, too!"

"Skepticism?"

"Yes. Even if you watch the news or a documentary, you shouldn't assume what they're saying is true simply because they say it or show you a video or a picture. As a history professor once said, everyone is biased, and selects the facts they feel are important. I'd take that a step further and say they select facts that confirm their bias. So long as you're aware of that, you can manage, because you can check alternate sources, something that is far easier these days with the internet, but again, you have to be careful there, too."

"So what do you do?"

"There's a phrase my Russian friends use that was used by Ronald Reagan -- «Доверяй, но проверяй»; 'Trust, but verify'."

You speak Russian?"

"Only phrases. I speak fluent Swedish and passable Spanish, along with a bit of Dutch, German, and French, and I can read Italian. I know a number of Japanese phrases, mostly to do with karate or politeness."

"How did you learn all those languages?"

"I'll tell you while we're in a bubble bath later. Now, we have more pressing business -- reliving you of the burden of virginity!"

"Huh? Burden of virginity?"

"Yes. It informs your actions, and until today, controlled you. Once you're no longer a virgin, you'll truly be free."

LXVI. Holy God!

December 22, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

"Holy God!" Raven groaned after a third orgasm from my tongue. "Put it in me already!"

I moved up, grasped my shaft, rubbed my glans along her thin labia, and pushed into her sopping pussy with one firm thrust.

"Oomph!" she gasped.

I lowered my body onto Raven, crushing her large breasts between us, pressed my tongue into her mouth, and began fucking her with long, slow strokes. After a minute, she moved her arms and legs around me and began moving with me, tentatively at first, then in sync. Not long after, she groaned into my mouth and I felt spasms around my shaft, so I ground against her to intensify her orgasm. She tightened her arms and legs and pushed up, increasing the pressure on her clit, broke the kiss, and groaned loudly. She took several gasping breaths, and once the spasms subsided, I began thrusting again.

"What...are...you...doing...to...me?" she gasped, barely able to get the words out.

"Making you cum!" I replied, slightly increasing the strength and frequency of my thrusts.

Raven's 'five minutes' comment had inspired me to give her the longest possible fuck, limited only by her lubrication, which was copious. She received the 'full

treatment' and had an additional five orgasms over the next twenty-five minutes before I pushed deep into her, ground against her, and fired jets of hot, sticky cum into her spasming pussy.

My orgasm ended before Raven's, so I continued to grind against her until it had passed, added five additional strokes, then carefully pulled out. I sucked and licked each nipple, then moved down between her legs and attacked her clit. Raven groaned loudly and two minutes later had another orgasm, after which I moved up next to her limp body. She was breathing hard, but not moving at all, except for the rise and fall of her chest caused by her diaphragm.

It was nearly ten minutes before she spoke.

"What the hell just happened?" she asked.

"I believe the relevant phrase is 'I fucked your brains out'," I said with a grin she couldn't see.

"I had no idea!" Raven exclaimed.

"I'll be ready to do it again as soon as you are."

"Again? Like that?"

"If you want, or we can do something different," I offered.

"No! Like that! Again!"

Without a word, I moved on top of her, French kissed her, then began again by pleasuring her breasts and pussy with my mouth until I was hard, at which point I 'fucked her brains out' once again. And a third time, after which she fell asleep. I took a nap, waking when she stirred.

"Bubble bath?" I suggested.

"I'm not sure I can get out of bed," she replied.

I got up, started the water in the tub, added bubble bath, then returned to the bed and helped Raven up, walked her to the tub, and assisted her in getting in. I got in as well, had her recline against me, and began tweaking one of her nipples with my left hand while fingering her pussy with my right.

"I don't know if I can take much more," she groaned five minutes later as her body was wracked by an orgasm.

"I'll stop if you want," I said, then nibbled on her earlobe.

"Holy God!" she groaned. "What are you doing?"

"Making you cum!" I replied.

She had three more orgasms before the water in the tub began to cool and we got out.

"I don't even know what to say," she said as I led her to the shower to wash off the suds.

"Thank you' is customary!" I teased.

"Don't be a jerk!" Raven protested.

"I was just yanking your chain," I replied.

"You're hard again?" she asked.

"From fingering your pussy and playing with your breast," I replied. "I won't turn down a blowjob!"

Raven laughed, "What guy would? I've never done it, but I'll try."

She carefully lowered herself to her knees, grasped my shaft, and planted a tentative kiss on my glans. As was common for girls who had never done it, she needed a bit of guidance, but the combination of lips, tongue, and sucking never failed to produce the desired result. I didn't try to hold back and about six minutes later, I twitched and groaned, and Raven stroked, sucked, and lashed my glans with her tongue as cum splashed into her mouth.

When the pulses subsided, I helped her from her knees, and we shared a deep French kiss, though she had swallowed, so there was only a light coating of cum on her tongue. After a minute, we broke the kiss, got out of the shower, and dried off.

"Is what we've done normal for you?" Raven asked as we began dressing.

"I match what I do to what I believe the girl needs, or what she expressly asks for."

"How did you know? I had no idea, but you seemed to just know."

"Remember what I said about being able to read people?"

"Yes. You read people that well?"

"You tell me."

Raven laughed softly, "OK, I think it's obvious you do. What happens now?"

"You arise and walk in the newness of life!"

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"It's a phrase used in adult Christian baptism, and declares the old self is dead and the new self is not burdened by the old self. You are free."

"And what happens between us?"

"We stay in touch, I mentor you, and we see what happens."

"I'd ask to spend the night, but I don't have any way to explain that to my parents. Or are you going to say that doesn't matter anymore?"

"Remember what I said about acting in your own best interests? If you live in your parents' house, and want to stay there, then you need to respect them. If they aren't open-minded enough to accept that you, at age twenty-two, could have a love affair, then you don't want to do anything to offend them, unless you have an alternative place to live."

"I did have a friend ask me to move in with her, but my parents don't charge me rent."

"Then you have to evaluate your options and strike a proper balance."

"Will you come back to San Francisco?"

"At some point, but I can't say for sure when it will be."

"I think I'll go now," Raven said. "I'll see you in the morning."

We exchanged a soft kiss, I walked her to the elevator, rode down to the lobby with her, and then we walked across the street so she could retrieve her car. Once she'd done that, she drove off with a wave and I returned to the hotel.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

On Sunday afternoon, Tiffany, Hannah, Naomi, Lilibeth, and I went to Rachel's apartment to hang out. It was really cool to have a place we could go without any adults around, though my moms and dad didn't give us any grief, and Tiffany's mom had become totally cool ever since she'd spent the night with Dad. But it was still nice for it to be just us girls, without any prying eyes.

"What are you doing for Spring Break, Birgit?" Naomi asked.

"I was planning to go to New York City and see my friend."

"And the chauffeur?" Tiffany teased.

I giggled, "He was afraid! Very afraid! What about everyone else?"

"Javon and I are going to Samantha's house in Saint Martin. You guys should all come along! I'm sure she'd say 'yes'."

"That would be SO cool!" Hannah exclaimed. "But there's no way my parents would let me go without 'adult supervision', and I don't think they would accept you."

"Birgit's dad could supervise us!" Tiffany suggested.

All the girls laughed, including me, because we knew when Tiffany had said 'supervise', she really meant 'fuck'.

"Birgit, do you think there's any chance your mom and dad would be willing?" Hannah asked. "I'm sure my parents would be OK with that, though I think it would only work if you went with us for a girls' week or whatever we called it."

"I think the only thing you could do is ask," I said. "But I already have plans for New York."

"Wouldn't you rather go to Saint Martin?" Tiffany asked. "You could go to New York another time."

I could, but I didn't want Marcella to think I was blowing her off. I liked her a lot, and now that she had a girlfriend, we were just friends, which was perfect for me, given I wasn't all that interested in being with a girl, at least one-on-one; threesomes were a different thing.

"Let me think about it," I said.

"Birgit, can I talk to you a sec?" Hannah asked. "Privately?"

I nodded, and we got up and went into the kitchen.

"Remember what we talked about in Samantha's apartment? And what you suggested?"

I laughed and nodded, then said, "And you think Saint Martin is the place?"

"Think about it -- we'd have like three or four days when nobody could interrupt and we could all be with him."

In my dreams, I thought.

"You have to ask my moms," I said.

"Suzanne warned Tiffany not to talk about it until she was fifteen, which is March 1st. Hannah and I have both turned fifteen."

"I think if you talk directly to my mom, the chemistry professor, you'll be OK, even if you mention Tiffany."

"Would you change your plans for us? I mean, if your parents agree and we can convince our parents?"

I thought about it and wondered if there was a guy I could invite. I thought about Tomás, but there was no way I could imagine his parents would agree. The only logical person was Bob, and I suspected his parents would actually allow it, because they gave him a lot of freedom and weren't controlling like most parents.

"If you can arrange it, then, yes, I'll change my plans."

"You're the best, Birgit!"

We were about to go back to the living room when my mobile phone rang. I slipped it from my pocket and saw on the screen that it was Dad calling, and even if Mom hadn't already told me, I'd know what it meant.

"Sex Goddess speaking! How may I please you?"

Dad laughed hard.

"I hope nobody is around to hear you say that when I'm calling!" he said.

"They wouldn't know who is calling, but nobody is with me," I replied. "Mom told me you're staying another night."

"Yes. Aunt Stephanie and Liz are flying out so we can meet with a NIKA client tomorrow morning. I apologize for missing cuddle time."

"I know how you can make it up to me!" I giggled.

"Pumpkin..."

"Sorry. You know I love you."

"I do. I love you too. I'll see you late tomorrow."

We said 'goodbye', I closed my phone, slipped it into my pocket, then rejoined my friends.

 Jesse

"What do we need to do for the party?" Mitch asked.

Mitch, Pete, Freddy, Tom, Lee, and Jack were in the sauna late on Sunday afternoon.

"I think we're all set," I said. "Mom One and Dad already bought all the food and drinks we'll need, and Luna talked to all the girls. I spoke to all the guys, too."

"What did your dad say about the sauna?"

"What he almost always says -- use my discretion, be smart, and understand the consequences. I think so long as everyone keeps their mouth shut, and everyone has agreed to do that, we'll be fine so long as it's just sitting in here. That means no fooling around, or even teasing."

"Uhm, with all the naked girls..." Freddy asked.

Lee laughed, "Not a problem for me!"

"Serious question," Pete said, "but girls don't attract you in any way?"

"No, and they never have. Honestly, being in here with five good-looking guys who are in good shape is WAY more interesting than being in here with the entire girls' softball team, even if I was alone with them!"

"To answer your question, Freddy," I said. "You get used to it. If you have a problem, just put your towel over your lap if you're embarrassed or self-conscious."

"Won't the girls be offended?" Freddy asked.

"I'd say they'd be WAY more offended if you *didn't* have a boner!" Mitch declared, causing the rest of us to laugh.

"In all seriousness," I said, "nudity does not imply sex. Once you understand that, it's not a problem."

"You seriously didn't have a boner win here with the entire team?"

"I didn't," I replied. "That said, I have fooled around in here, though it was one-on-one."

"Are any of the girls lez?" Pete asked.

"I have no idea," I replied. "Gaydar is NOT a thing, which I think Lee proves. I mean, we know because he told us, but does he act 'gay'? I mean, besides the obvious!"

"Yeah, kissing a dude is pretty freakin' obvious!" Jack declared. "But Jesse is right, otherwise. I mean, if we didn't know Mom One and Mom Two were lesbian and just met them on the street, we'd all say they were MILFs!"

"Excuse me while I throw up!" I exclaimed, making fake gagging sounds.

The guys all laughed.

"There is no such thing as a MILF!" Lee declared. "DILF, sure, but MILF? Never!"

We all laughed.

"Aren't you worried about AIDS?" Tom asked.

"Sure, but so is Jesse. We both take precautions -- STD tests for sure, and rubbers for screwing."

"TMI!" Jack declared.

"Oh, come on!" Tom exclaimed. "Straight couples do that, too! You read the same book I did. The only difference between Lee and us is that he'd never put his dick in a pussy."

"You've done that?" Jack asked.

"No, I'm just saying in theory," Tom replied. "You'd have to ask the guys who have actually gotten laid!"

"Lee and Jesse, right?" Jack asked.

"Let's be careful," I said. "You guys all have girlfriends, well, not Lee, but the rest of you. Would your girlfriend be happy if you said you'd had sex with her? Or implied it?"

"But you admit it," Jack protested.

"Jesse has gone out with so many girls nobody could guess which one, if any!" Freddy declared. "Not to mention his friend from Minnesota visited and stayed in his room, which seems pretty freakin' definitive!"

"Guys, bad topic for conversation," I said. "I know all about locker room talk, and it's bad news no matter how you slice it."

[San Francisco, California]

 Steve

"Hi, Squirt!" I exclaimed when I opened the door to my room at 8:41pm on Sunday evening.

"Hi, Big Brother! We're all here, obviously; I waived the rule about flying together, so Liz and I were on the same flight. Ned couldn't get into the Mark Hopkins, so he's across the street at the Fairmont. He'll be in the lobby in about five minutes; Liz is already there."

"Shall we go down, then?"

We left my room, took the elevator down to the lobby, where we met Liz and Ned Jenkins. The Bellman called for a cab, and fifteen minutes later we were seated at a table for four at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse.

"Any idea what they want?" I asked.

"A way out, that saves them face," Ned replied. "I spoke with Meghan at Ford, Finch, and Burch, as we need local California counsel for the state law claims. She's flying up very early tomorrow to attend the meeting with us."

"If they want us to take responsibility, it's a non-starter," I said. "Well, for me, anyway; Stephanie has the final say."

"I spoke with Dad, Joyce, and Al," she said. "I couldn't get hold of Beth or Karl. They all think any kind of statement on our part that admits, or even infers, liability is too risky."

"Then what are we doing here, at the cost of thousands of dollars in airfare, hotel charges, and billable hours, when a polite 'see you in court' would be sufficient?"

"Because it would hurt our case," Ned replied. "Cole, Nichols, and Smith would tell the judge they tried to negotiate a settlement in good faith and we refused. That is not a good look for us, and would likely result in an order from the Court to sit down with them. So, we play the good faith game, and make our position clear. The Court is unlikely to require us to surrender, so failed negotiations won't harm our position nearly as much as refusing."

"I love how you attorneys couch things -- would a court *really* order us to surrender without a hearing on the merits?"

"It's highly unlikely," Ned replied, "and I doubt it would hold up on appeal, but, as they say, stranger things have happened. You know nothing is ever guaranteed, and there is no such thing as a 'slam dunk' case, because you can never predict what a judge or jury will do. You can pound the law all day, and that doesn't prevent the judge from taking a different position on what you feel is settled law. And then it gets *really* expensive, because you end up in appeals courts all the way to SCOTUS."

"I'm SO tempted to quote Dick the Butcher, but I know all three of you know the context of the 'first thing we do is kill all the layers' quote. What's our position, Squirt?"

"On the advice of all counsel, we listen to what they have to say, respond if appropriate, take some time to think it over, and if they want us to take the blame, politely tell them to pound sand."

"I can live with that. Where do the recovery efforts stand?"

"Ross was on site on Friday and will be there tomorrow. We overnighted a complete server from our recovery stock, even though Cole hadn't paid for that. I'm not sure how much we'll charge them for that, but Liz...well, I'll let her tell you."

"I think, as a good-faith gesture, we offer to waive our fees except for the actual cost of the hardware. If they were to reject that tomorrow, it would put us in a very good position with the Court. In other words, we're bending over backwards to help at the same time we're disclaiming liability. I do have a theory as to why they asked for the meeting."

"What's that?"

"If they wait for us to file our reply brief, it becomes part of the public record, and will detail their negligence. That would not be a good look for them, no matter what. It's also the case that they don't need to blame us for the server crash to get continuances in any of their civil litigation -- the courts will, generally, grant short continuances for 'Acts of God' or reasonably unexpected events."

"This outcome was pretty much guaranteed by their behavior," I countered.

Before Ned could answer, the waiter came to take our orders, which included a bottle of red wine to split amongst the four of us.

"You can say that as a technical expert," Ned said once the waiter had left. "But the average person wouldn't necessarily see it that way, so Cole will receive the benefit of the doubt. This is a reputation problem for them, more than anything. Sure, they have work product they have to recreate, but that's really a minor problem, in the end. They won't have lost any evidence, or filings they've already made, or anything like that."

"Client lists?" I inquired.

"As best we can tell, individual attorneys still have some kind of physical list, be it a Rolodex, Filofax, or DayTimer. John is also going to request a forensic analysis of the hard drives to see if any data can be recovered."

"I wouldn't count on that," I replied. "That's an expensive proposition."

"True," Stephanie interjected, "but if we can recover even some of the data, it will help. As I said, we'll worry about the invoice after the fact."

"Make sure the initial invoice contains everything, at full price," Ned suggested. "Send it with a letter which offers to discuss discounts and amendments. Well, assuming we don't reach some kind of conclusion tomorrow morning."

The waiter brought our salads, which limited conversation to small talk as we ate them. Not long after we finished our salads, the waiter brought our main courses. When we finished, we declined dessert, and per NIKA policy, Stephanie, as the most senior person, paid the check. The four of us took a cab back to the Fairmont, and Liz, Stephanie, and I walked across the street to the hotel.

When we walked into the lobby, I was surprised to see Raven sitting on a couch, and walked over to her.

"Hi," I said. "I didn't expect to see you until morning."

"With those two gorgeous women with you, I think I might have made a mistake."

I laughed and waved Liz and Stephanie over.

"Raven, my *Consigliere* and NIKA's inside counsel, Liz Crane, and my sister, Stephanie Adams. Liz, Stephanie, my friend Raven, whose dad owns Golden Gate Livery."

Liz and Stephanie exchanged a look, rolled their eyes, then greeted Raven. They immediately excused themselves and headed to the elevators.

"What just happened?" Raven asked.

"My reputation precedes me," I chuckled. "They both know why you're here and what it is you expect to be doing less than five minutes from now."

"I thought you said you were discreet."

"I am, but given my sister and I grew up together and she runs my company, and spends a lot of time with my family, don't you think she'd have a clue? And Liz, as my *Consigliere*, knows basically everything about me, which is vital for my personal legal counsel. I've known her since she graduated High School, and once she finished Law School, I hired her."

"I can put two and two together!" Raven declared.

"And she's married to a great guy, so whatever might have been true in the past is no longer true. I think you can work out for yourself the other situation."

"Given you aren't from Appalachia, I think so!"

I laughed, "I actually *am* from Appalachia. Yes, I was born in the LA area, but we moved to Ohio when I was nine, and we lived in Clermont County, which is the western limit of Appalachia."

"You're a Californian, even if you left! And you sure don't act like a redneck! Or sound like one!"

"I take it my assumption about why you're here is correct?"

"Unless you're a complete idiot, which I know not to be the case."

"What happened at home?"

"I used my new skills and asked my dad how what he did when my mom was eighteen was different from what I'm doing at twenty-two. It took an hour-long conversation, but in the end he said I was an adult and had to make my own decisions. I did leave out the part about you being married."

"Wise."

"Why are we standing here?"

"I have no idea!"



December 23, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

I'd arranged with Hannah for her to have breakfast at our house so she could talk with my mom. I so wanted to hear the conversation, but Hannah had asked Mom to speak privately, and they'd gone to the Indian room once we'd finished breakfast.

"What's that about?" Ashley asked.

"Some of us want to go to Saint Martin on Spring Break with Rachel and Javon, but the girls' parents will insist on adult chaperones, even though Rachel is eighteen and Javon is nineteen."

"Who?"

"Tiffany, Hannah, Naomi, and me."

"Say no more!" Ashley giggled. "They want Dad as their 'chaperone!'"

"Duh! If we go, I was thinking of asking Bob. I doubt Tomás could convince his parents to let him go."

"That should keep you from being *too* frustrated when your friends actually get what you want!"

"Don't be mean!" I complained.

"Just stating the facts!" Ashley declared smugly.

"You can be a real bitch, Sis!"

"Only to you!" Ashley declared. "Everyone else thinks I'm the calm, quiet, perfect child!"

"Boy, do you have them fooled!" I declared.

"I believe *my* strategy for world domination is more likely to be successful!"

"What-ever!" I fumed. "You still won't tell me what you think you know about Dad."

"And I can't say it because I have zero actual proof and I am not going to say something like that when I don't have a shred of evidence."

I still couldn't work out what she thought she knew that I didn't know. Dad was an open book, and we all knew about his dalliances and expert deflowerings. That made me wonder if she was messing with me by claiming to know something that she didn't actually know, and I decided that was the most likely situation. Nothing else made sense.

"What are you doing today?" I asked.

"Amber, Susie, Chadrima, Veronica, Jasmine, and I are going ice skating. Aunt Penny is taking us. What about you?"

"Tomás is coming for lunch."

"I'm sure," Ashley giggled. "And you're going to eat, too!"

"What-ever!"

Hannah came back to the kitchen, and we went up to my room and shut the door.

"Your mom said she'd talk to your dad and your other mom and Suzanne," Hannah said. "She thinks it'll be OK, but then we have to convince our parents."

"I think you just tell them Rachel invited us and that my mom and dad will be there. Don't mention Javon or me inviting Bob, but don't lie. That's a sure way to get in trouble."

"Good point. Your dad comes home tonight, right?"

"Yes, but it'll be late. I'm sure we'll know tomorrow, and I'll call you, so you can tell Tiffany and Naomi."

"Can I ask you something?"

"You're one of my best friends!"

"Does what we want upset you?"

It didn't, but it did make me insanely jealous, and made me want to reconsider my decision to stop trying.

"No," I replied. "I'm not upset. It's not like Dad is hitting on you or encouraging you."

"I know, but we're your best friends."

"You are, but what I said is important. Dad promised Jesse and me that he would never, ever hit on our friends, and he hasn't ever done that. That means I can invite people over and not have to worry about it, which is where the problem

would be. You heard Samantha describe how her dad tried to get every friend she brought home from the time she was fourteen into bed and mostly got them all. That's not what my dad does, and it's different. And I'm sure you remember what I said about him and your reaction!"

"That if he wasn't your dad, you'd have wanted him to pop your cherry! And I said 'Ewww'."

"Doesn't it make sense that it doesn't bother me that other girls see him that way?"

"And it really doesn't gross you out?"

"No. And don't worry, if Bob can come along, I'll have plenty of orgasms of my own!"

"He's that good?"

"I did train him!" I giggled.

"I need to get home," Hannah said. "We're baking Christmas cookies today!"

"We do that tomorrow!"

I walked her to the door, she put on her hat, coat, and gloves, we hugged, and she left.

[San Francisco, California]

 Steve

"Holy God!" Raven groaned when I moved off her after a very energetic morning fuck.

"I hate to say this, but we need to get to the shower so I can meet my sister, Liz, and another attorney for breakfast before the meeting."

"Three times last night and once this morning will have to do, I guess," Raven said. "On top of the three times yesterday afternoon!"

I helped her from the bed and led her to the shower, where we took turns soaping each other. Raven was, as I'd noticed when I first met her, cute but not pretty, and carried about ten extra pounds, in addition to being curvy, rather than athletic. But my preference for girls with 'Steve-type' bodies was just that, a preference, and I'd thoroughly enjoyed my time with Raven.

We finished washing each other, and I was about to turn off the spray when Raven kissed me, sank to her knees, and took me into her mouth. I enjoyed blowjobs, especially shower blowjobs, and Raven's technique was awesome, despite it being only the second one she'd given. As she got me close, I decided to up the ante, as it were.

"Don't swallow before you kiss me," I said just seconds before I came.

Raven stroked, bobbed, licked, and sucked, but didn't swallow, and after accepting the last spurt, rose to French kiss me. We kissed for about two minutes before she broke the kiss.

"What the..." she asked.

"To make a point about who I am and my approach to sex," I replied. "I will point out you didn't flinch when I kissed you with my lips, face, and tongue covered with your juices!"

"As if I was coherent enough to even notice!" Raven declared with a soft laugh. "You aren't grossed out by that?"

"No. My very first lover, when I was fourteen, made a point that kissing after a blowjob showed just how much it was appreciated. From that point on, I never hesitated, nor did I hesitate to perform oral sex on a girl after cumming in her. Eventually, one girl didn't swallow and despite my initial surprise, I realized it wasn't a big deal, and it turned her on, so I did it."

"What you explained about your approach to sex last night -- whatever the girl wants and whatever makes her feel good."

"Exactly. There are some limits, but nobody has ever asked me to cross any of them, except one -- bondage but as a rape fantasy. Given I know girls who have been raped, I simply couldn't do that."

"I can see that," Raven said as we got out of the shower and began drying off. "What's the weirdest thing you've ever done?"

"One girl, while I was in college, tied me up, blindfolded me, then put a vibrator in my butt. She got me hard, mounted me, and then pushed a dildo into my mouth and made me fellate it."

"WHOA!" Raven gasped. "Seriously?!"

"Seriously. I've also had a girl use a strap-on and do me in the butt."

"Uhm, like gay guys?"

"We're both straight," I chuckled. "And heterosexuals do that, too. Some people find it very exciting."

"You?"

"Generally, only if the girl asks. I've encountered only three or four girls in the past twenty-five years who really, really enjoyed anal sex. All the others, it was an experiment or to complete the cycle, so to speak."

"The cycle?"

"All penetrations possible, and for girls with big enough chests, mammary as well."

"Mammary?"

"Using lubrication and rubbing my dick between a girl's breasts and cumming on her face."

"You like that?"

"It's different, it feels good, and it can be sexy, but not all girls like it."

"Which is your deciding factor."

"In nearly every case. There have been a few where I deduced what the girl needed was to be dominated, so I did what I felt she needed."

"Where you right?"

"Yes. As I said, I've made a few mistakes, but mostly I read the situation correctly. You think I did with you, right?"

"Perfectly. I wouldn't have known what to ask for!"

"Let's stay in touch," I said.

Raven smiled, "You bet!"

We dressed and left the room, heading to the hotel dining room. I decided to invite Raven for breakfast, as anything else would have been tacky, and she accepted. That made for a bit of discomfort for Ned, but I was sure Liz would clue him in enough after the fact to ensure there wasn't a problem. After breakfast, Raven left to make a pickup and another driver with a minivan picked us up for the ride to Cole, Nichols, and Smith, who had offices at the foot of California Street on the corner of Davis Street.

The receptionist showed us into a conference room where Megan Burch was waiting, and I greeted her with a quick hug, then introduced Ned, who she had not met. A few minutes later, we were joined by Richard Cole, Samuel Nichols, and Marjorie Taylor, an outside attorney. Stephanie introduced our team and Richard Cole introduced their team.

"First," I said, "I'd like to confirm that Ross Brown from our firm is here working on building your new server."

"He is," Richard Cole confirmed.

"It's your meeting, Counselor," Ned said to Richard Cole. "Do you have a proposed way forward?"

"We think it serves all parties best if we can come to an agreement," Marjorie Taylor said.

"We agree," Ned confirmed. "If you allow me to propose a way forward that works for NIKA..."

"Go ahead," Samuel Nichols said.

"NIKA is willing to waive all our usual fees, except for the cost of the replacement server and the time charged by Ross Brown, at our contracted rate, in exchange for voluntary dismissal of the suit. NIKA would not accept any liability, but would be willing to discuss a potential joint statement about the incident."

"You do realize we've suffered direct, quantifiable damages, as stated in our suit," Marjorie Taylor said.

Ned nodded, "We do, and while you have not seen our reply brief, as it's not due until January 21st, we can identify six separate direct breeches of the obligations under the contract, as well as what we believe is reckless disregard for care of the computer systems. It's our position that we'd prevail in court, Megan?"

"Thank you, Ned. I'm a California licensed attorney who specializes in information technology law, and having reviewed the applicable statutes, the contract terms, and legal precedent, we believe that the contract terms were not unconscionable, provided proper consideration, did not violate any California statutes, and obligated both parties to appropriate duty and care. We believe we would win on the law and the facts. We're offering an accommodation to you, a valued client, despite having no legal requirement to do so."

"Just so we're clear," Stephanie said, "We're willing to agree to any language you prefer, so long as it does not make NIKA liable or culpable. That includes calling it a 'rare, unforeseen, catastrophic failure'. What we can't do is accept any liability, for what I would hope are obvious reasons."

"May we confer privately?" Richard Cole asked.

"Of course," Stephanie agreed.

The three attorneys left the room, and our team huddled close.

"They have to take it," Megan said. "I know Marjorie Taylor, and she's as good as I am, and does work for Sun Microsystems and HP. She has to know we hold, to put it in Steve's terms, the 'nuts'."

The others all laughed.

"Still cleaning up at the card table?" Ned asked.

"When the men allow me to play!" I chuckled. "Sometimes I sit out at their request."

"How much further are you willing to go?" Megan asked.

"I think we're at our limit," Stephanie replied. "Accepting any liability is a non-starter. I'm not super-comfortable calling it 'unforeseen', but I'm willing to say that to make this go away, along with eating what will probably be around \$20K in direct costs, and more like \$30K in lost revenue."

"Right," I said, "but you have to offset that by what it would cost us to lose the licensing fees for a 75-seat install, and the negative word of mouth."

"Oh, I know," Stephanie agreed. "That's why I'm willing to go as far as I am. We will need a written agreement that they'll follow our directions in the future."

"Just have them sign a new contract," Megan said. "Attach a letter stating their responsibilities clearly, in plain English. Run it by me, and I'll insert the appropriate legalese that will ensure any attempted suit for a similar action would likely be dismissed on a motion even before a reply brief was due."

"Wait!" I exclaimed. "A lawyer making a near-guarantee? What's next? A singing, dancing mouse with his own amusement park?"

"If you're quoting *The Muppets*, I think we're in serious trouble!" Megan said with a laugh.

"Nah, that's just my Big Brother being himself!" Stephanie declared. "And here they come."

"After consulting with my clients," Marjorie Taylor said, "we're amenable to dismissing the suit in exchange for a joint statement, and no charges for restoring the system, given the amount of work it will take to manually re-create all the data."

Stephanie looked to me and I gave her an answer with my eyes, which would be imperceptible to anyone but her, or Jennifer, had she been in the room.

"We're willing to waive all the fees except the cost of the hardware," Stephanie said, understanding the near-telepathic communication we still maintained. "Given we have to pay Dell, we simply can't waive those costs. We will charge you only our cost, with no markup."

"Done," Richard Cole said before his outside counsel could respond. "I'll have a memo of understanding drawn up. Who will work with us on the statement?"

"Megan," Stephanie said.

"I'll have the memo of understanding ready for us to sign in fifteen minutes."

We all shook hands, and they left.

"Did you two agree wordlessly just by looking at each other?" Ned asked.

I smiled, "Yes. There's one other person in the world I can do that with -- my eldest son's mother."

"And what Stephanie proposed is exactly what you wanted?"

"Yes."

"Uncanny," Ned said. "I'm going to guess that's somehow related to your success at the card table."

I smiled, "Knowing what their cards are, by the way they hold their eyes!"

"From *The Muppets* to Kenny Rogers?" Megan asked. "How do those go together?"

"Now you've done it!" Liz said, shaking her head.

"Kenny Rogers was on an episode of *The Muppet Show* in 1979 and sang *The Gambler*," I said. "I actually saw it while I was living in Sweden. So yes, from *The Muppet Show* to Kenny Rogers!"

"I should know better by now," Megan said, shaking her head.

"Is it true you two met in first grade?" Ned asked.

"It is," I replied. "But then I didn't see her again for twenty-five years."

"Small world," Ned said.

"Indeed it is."

LXVII. Flight Delay

December 23, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

"I think I'll take the cable car back to the hotel," I said once the memo of understanding had been signed. "But I'll call Golden Gate Livery for a car for the rest of you."

"I have a meeting this afternoon in Sunnyvale," Megan said. "I'm going to head out that way and work from our satellite office there."

"Mind if I hang with you, Steve?" Liz asked.

"Not at all," I replied.

"Then I'll see you both at the hotel," Stephanie said.

I placed the call and let the dispatcher know there were only two passengers, then confirmed the car to take me to the airport, positive that Raven would find a way to be assigned that trip. I wasn't on the same flight as Stephanie and Liz, as there was no justification for waiving the rule, and they had an earlier flight than I did, meaning I had some time to relax before heading to the airport.

I shook hands with Ned, hugged Megan and my sister, then Liz and I left the building to walk to the plaza at Dunham to catch the cable car that would take us up the steep California Street.

"You're incorrigible!" Liz declared once we were away from the building.

"If that's news, Counselor, I need a new *Consigliere!*"

"Is Raven someone you met here before?"

"No, she was my first chauffeuse who worked for a car service!"

"Only Steve Adams would use that word in conversation!"

"I gotta be me!" I sang, slightly off key.

"Keep your day job!"

"No kidding," I chuckled.

"Is your new friend now a subversive?"

"What do you think?"

Liz smirked, "I think you waved your magic wand, and she'd do anything you asked!"

"Something you know from personal experience!"

"Whatever else is true, it is absolutely true that day in Saint Martin was the best and most important day in my life. That was the day everything changed, and is why I'm here with you right now. I might even say it's why I'm married to Julius and going to have his baby in early July!"

"Congratulations!" I exclaimed happily. "Not quite three months, right?"

"I see your brain isn't too addled from sex to do basic math!"

"Love you, too! I'm very happy for the two of you! Do you know how much maternity leave you'll take?"

"The maximum, if you'll agree that I can work a few hours a day from home after the first six weeks."

"Make the arrangements with Bob. I guarantee Stephanie will endorse whatever modification to policy you need or want. I take it nobody else knows? Well, besides Julius!"

"What? You think I told my husband before you?!"

I laughed, "I'd be cross with you if you really did do that!"

"Both sets of parents, plus all the Saint Martin Six!"

"That kind of long-term friendship is important, and I think you made the right decision to tell them before me, despite how close we are. How did Louise react?"

"She's going to be the best 'aunt' in history! She's engaged, by the way."

"That's good to hear."

"You made her feel very, very special twice -- once in Saint Martin, then once on that flight home, years later."

"She's a special girl. You don't have to answer, and you may not know, but did she ever pay LeeAnn back?"

Liz laughed, "Yes. They had a flight to Europe and LeeAnn finally joined the Mile-High Club! She was hoping to see you at some point, but it never worked out and now she's married to the broker she seduced on the flight!"

"Good for her! How are the other girls doing?"

"Great! The Saint Martin Six are going to throw a baby shower for me in April or May, so you'll be able to see all of them, though now all of them are married, so no hanky-panky!"

I chuckled, "It will still be good to see them."

We got onto the cable car, and a moment later it began making its way up the steep hill.

"I take it you decided to come with me to reveal your good news?"

"Yes," Liz replied. "I'll make it public in a week or so, after I speak to Bob."

"Anything else going on in your life?"

"Not really. NIKA, Julius, and my friends occupy my time, and soon enough, Julius or Juliette."

"Nice names," I replied.

"Thanks."

"If there's anything I can do for you, anything at all, just let me know."

"I will," she said, squeezing my hand.

We held hands for the rest of the ride, only letting go when the car stopped near the Mark Hopkins. We went into the hotel and I called my sister to join us in my suite, which she did. The three of us hung out for about an hour before the girls had to check out, and after they left, I went back to my room and pulled out my computer.

I spent about an hour reading and responding to emails, as well as checking Usenet, then shut everything down and went to have lunch in the hotel restaurant. After lunch, I checked out, and about five minutes later, Raven arrived to drive me to the airport, as I'd suspected she would.

"Fancy seeing you again!" I chuckled when I saw her.

A bellboy put my bag in the trunk, and at Raven's bidding, I got into the front seat, rather than the back.

"How did things go with your dad this morning?" I asked as she pulled out of the parking court.

"He just asked if I was OK, and I said I was. I'm pretty sure he thought last night would be my first time, given my dating history, which never got serious beyond some making out and some touching outside clothes. He didn't know that, though he knew I never had a serious, steady boyfriend."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"That you're a successful entrepreneur from Chicago, very sweet, and older. He didn't ask about you being married or divorced or whatever, so I didn't have to try to finesse that. He did ask me if I thought it was 'serious', by which he meant marriage. I said probably not, but I really wanted to spend the night with you. He wasn't judgmental, just concerned. I'm sure I'll hear about it from my mom

tonight, but my response to her will be that there is no way I'm pregnant from my first time!"

"I'd be a bit less blunt," I said. "Convey the idea, but do it in a way that won't start a fight."

"How so?"

"Say something along the lines that her experience led you to be very careful to avoid a difficult situation."

"You think pretty quickly."

"One advantage of age is the accumulated knowledge and experience, usually called 'wisdom', but you know my take on that concept."

"I've been thinking about it, and I wonder how you are so confident if you don't think you're wise."

"It's more that I admit freely I might be wrong, and nearly everything I say or believe is provisional and subject to revision at any time, based on new information. Nothing is ever 'settled' with regard to my beliefs, with one exception -- the love I have for my family and friends. That is never in question, will never be in question, and ought never to be questioned. It is the one unchangeable thing in the universe."

"You don't fall out of love?"

"I don't believe romantic love matters. The kind of love that matters is self-sacrificing love, which is «agápē» in Greek, and is often translated 'charity' in the Bible. I assume you know the verse 'husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church?'"

"Yes, of course."

"The word 'love' in that sentence is «agápē», and it means putting the other person before yourself, no matter what. Most importantly, it's a decision, not a feeling."

"But couldn't you decide *not* to love someone?"

"Could I? Yes. Would I? No. No matter what happens, nothing would stop me from loving my wives, my kids, and my friends. And if I were to say 'I love you' to someone, I mean «agápē», not «érōs», which is associated with romantic love."

Raven was quiet for a moment, then nodded, "And because of that, you could say 'I love you' to many people without diminishing any of them."

"Exactly."

"Have you ever fallen in love?"

"Twice. Once, at fourteen, but she died in a boating accident when we were both fifteen. Then Kara, who is my senior wife."

"Your girlfriend died when you were fifteen?"

"Yes. It made a complete mess of my life and it took me years to truly come to terms with it. It also helped me become the man I am today."

"That's so sad."

"My eldest daughter is actually named for her."

"Do you do anything that isn't strange?" Raven asked.

"Nope!" I declared with a grin.

"What are the rules?"

"For?"

"Fucking!" Raven smirked.

"You're learning. You need to have a clean STI test at least every six months, and if you are with anyone else, both for your protection and mine, they have to have an STI test in advance. If you don't follow that rule, then you need to wait six months and have a clean STI test before we could be together again. Also, for your own protection, you should go on the Pill to ensure you don't get pregnant, or be religious in your use of rubbers. The other options are an IUD and a diaphragm, if you know what those are."

"Our sex ed wasn't completely useless; they were pretty good at explaining birth control and STDs. Not so much anything else."

"Typical. I suspect it won't surprise you that we educated our kids about sex from the time they were little."

"Nothing surprises me now because I simply assume nothing you do conforms to social norms!"

"Another good sign."

"I can't believe how things could change so much in such a short time."

"Once you free your mind, everything becomes possible. Remember your comment about sex being a rite of passage? You've finally become an adult, at age twenty-two. But sex was simply the ceremony, similar to confirmation."

"Done at an age when traditionally Catholics are considered to have full moral agency and are fully responsible for their actions. You've compared sex to baptism and confirmation! As if it were a sacrament."

"Well, technically, it is, in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, but in my system, it's a rite of initiation, comparable to baptism and confirmation, or chrismation in the Eastern Orthodox Church."

"Do you have something that conforms to the Sacrament of Penance?"

"Not specifically, but it's the obligation of my mentees, whether they're karate students or not, to admit error, seek forgiveness when necessary, and experience the love of acceptance, no matter what. It is much closer to the Eastern Orthodox practice, which focuses on the experience of God's love, rather than the Latin practice, which focuses on punishment, or the avoidance thereof."

"You're not a Christian."

"No, I'd say my system is eclectic, and is syncretistic, including elements of Zen Buddhism, Shinto, Hinduism, Orthodox Christianity, and Norse paganism, along with the principles of Shōtōkan karate."

"Is that something I should look into? Karate, I mean."

"It has helped me mentally, physically, and spiritually."

"I could stand to lose twenty pounds, mostly from my butt and waist."

"Sitting all day in the car isn't conducive to being in top physical shape."

"Did you just call me fat?"

"No, I simply pointed out a fact -- lack of exercise leads to not being in top physical shape. YOU made the comment about weight loss."

"Truthful answer -- did you notice I had some flab?"

"I noticed you were cute, but not in optimal physical shape. I believe what happened yesterday afternoon, last night, and this morning showed that I found you attractive! Not to mention I explained what I find sexy."

"Intelligence," Raven said. "You made the point that you liked smart girls."

"Exactly. Certainly, physical attraction is important, but intellectual attraction is more important."

"Ever had sex with a dumb girl?"

"I have always avoided airheads," I replied. "There were girls who behaved foolishly, but that was poor judgment, not lack of intelligence. You've experienced my style; how well would that go over with the stereotypical airhead cheerleader or, to use something more relevant to California, a self-obsessed Valley Girl?"

"If you can't have a deep philosophical discussion with them before or after, you aren't interested, and you'd find the sex unfulfilling."

"Very perceptive."

"And it was the conversation that led you to, as you put it, 'fuck my brains out'?"

"Yes."

"It was a test, wasn't it?"

"Yes. And you passed with flying colors."

"Despite being totally confused?" Raven asked.

"No, *because* you were totally confused. Your confusion was not because you didn't understand what I was saying, but because your worldview was being exploded. You held your own and survived the Socratic Inquisition."

"Is this where I say I didn't expect the Socratic Inquisition?"

"Nobody does!" I declared.

Raven laughed, and unfortunately, we exited the highway at the airport, which brought our conversation to an end. Raven pulled up in front of the American Airlines departure hall and stopped in a designated livery spot. We got out, she got my bag from the trunk, and set it on the sidewalk. We exchanged a hug, and she gave me a quick kiss.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome."

I picked up my bag and walked into the terminal, stopping at the door to wave 'goodbye'.

[Chicago, Illinois]

 Birgit

"Hi, it's Birgit," I said when Bob answered his phone.

"Hi, Birgit! What's up?"

"Plans aren't set yet, but would you like to go to Saint Martin over Spring Break?"

"The Dutch-French Island in the Caribbean?"

"Yes. My dad's friend and business partner has a house there, and we'd fly down in her private jet."

"Private jet?"

"She runs Spurgeon Capital and is worth close to a billion dollars!"

"Maybe I should meet HER!" Bob declared.

"She's married to a former Navy guy and is more than twice your age!"

"And your point is?" Bob asked.

"Whatever! Do you want to go?"

"Is this some secret plan to get me into your bed again?"

"As if me wanting that was any kind of secret!" I giggled. "Do you think your parents would let you go?"

"All I can do is ask. They're going to want to know which adults will be there."

"My mom and dad, for sure."

"Which mom?"

"The chemistry professor. But maybe the others. I don't know for sure yet. As I said, we have to confirm everything, but could you ask your parents?"

"Sure, but I don't know what they'll say, and I'm positive they'll want to speak to your parents and the friend who owns the house. Who else is going?"

"Tiffany, Naomi, Hannah, Rachel, and Javon, but everyone has to get permission except Rachel and Javon."

"Let me talk to my parents and I'll let you know after Christmas, OK?"

"Yes."

I hung up, then changed the sheets on my bed that Tomás and I had messed up earlier in the afternoon. I took the dirty ones down to the laundry room and put them in the washing machine, then went to the kitchen to help Yuriko make dinner.

[San Francisco, California]

 Steve

"Is there a flight available on a different airline?" I asked the gate agent.

"I'm sorry, no," she said. "All flights to Chicago are delayed at the moment. There's a general ground stop for all flights to O'Hare, and we have no information on how soon it will end."

"Wonderful. Thanks."

"We'll make an announcement as soon as we can."

"Thank you."

I moved away from the check-in desk and saw someone sitting in the seat I'd vacated, so I sat down in a different chair, a bit further away from the check-in desk.

"What did she say?" a man about my age asked.

"All flights on all airlines to Chicago O'Hare are on a ground stop, with no ETA as to when they'll be released."

"Any idea why?"

"No, but it could be anything from a technical fault to weather to traffic to an incident at the airport -- something as simple as a plane making an emergency landing or a runway excursion."

"You fly a lot, I guess?"

"I do. Steve Adams."

"Greg Casper. What do you do?"

"I'm President of NIKA Consulting, an IT firm in Chicago, but mostly I'm a software engineer. You?"

"Chief of Emergency Medicine at Moore Memorial Hospital near McKinley, Ohio."

"Well, I have ten bucks in my pocket that you know my wife as well as my friend, Doctor Mike Loucks."

Greg laughed, "Wow! Talk about a small world! I do know Doctor Jessica Adams, and Mike Loucks was a snot-nosed medical student when I was a Resident! Of course, then he was one of my Residents when I was an Attending. They call me 'Ghost'."

"Nice to meet you, Ghost!"

We shook hands.

"What brings you to California?" I asked.

"A sick friend, who, sadly, I will probably never see again in this life. How about you?"

"Spending time with a friend and meeting with a client."

"Heck of a day to have a delayed flight," Ghost said.

"How much time between our scheduled arrival and your connecting flight to Columbus?"

"About an hour. And it's the last flight out."

"That sucks. Let me call Jess and see if she knows what's going on."

I pulled my mobile phone from my pocket, pressed the correct speed-dial button for Jessica's mobile, and she answer on the second ring.

"Hi, Tiger!"

"Hi, Babe. My flight is delayed because all flights into O'Hare are ground stopped. Ghost and I were wondering if you knew of anything going on at O'Hare."

"Ghost? As in Greg Casper?"

"Yes. He's sitting next to me."

"Wow! Small world!"

"That's what I said."

"I haven't heard anything, but let me bring up a news site. Hang on a sec."

I could hear keys clicking and about a minute later.

"Nothing on the *Trib* site, and the only thing a search found was about expecting delays due to so many people flying today and tomorrow."

"I figured it was probably traffic," I replied. "How's the weather?"

"Around freezing and cloudy, but no snow or rain."

"OK. I'll let you know what I find out. I'll obviously be late."

"I'll let everyone know. Say 'hi' to Ghost for me!"

"Will do. Thanks, Babe!"

I closed my phone to disconnect the call and slipped it into my pocket.

"Nothing on the news and the weather is OK. I'm going to guess it's just traffic delays. Jess said to say 'hi'.

We chatted for about ten minutes and I learned that he was married to Mike's wife's cousin, and had three kids -- a boy and two girls. He'd been appointed Chief of Emergency medicine about the time Mike had taken the same role in Rutherford. He'd met Jess at a conference in 1992, and, of course, knew Al Barton.

"Passengers waiting on American Airlines Flight 1183 holding tickets connecting through Chicago, please come to the check-in desk."

"That's not a good sign," Greg said.

"I'd say they're going to rebook you for tomorrow morning rather than send you to Chicago. Make sure you get a hotel voucher, a pair of meal vouchers, and transportation vouchers. Sometimes you have to ask."

"Thanks for the tip. I've only ever had one flight canceled, but they got me out later the same day. Let me go learn my fate!"

"You called it," he said when he returned twenty minutes later. "And I did get all the vouchers by asking. My flight is at 6:10am tomorrow, so I should get home in time for Vespers, just barely."

"I should have guessed you were Russian Orthodox, given you married Mike's wife's cousin!"

"He fixed us up, believe it or not!"

"I believe it! It was nice to meet you. If you're in Chicago, make sure you look us up!"

I gave him my card, we shook hands, and he left, and a quick survey of the gate showed about a third of the passengers had been rebooked. My gut told me that the fact they hadn't rebooked the rest of us meant they felt the flight would eventually leave. With nothing else to do, I pulled a copy of *The Economist* from my bag and started reading.

"Do you mind if I sit next to you?" a pretty teenage girl asked about ten minutes later.

"No," I replied, wondering if I should take one of my fast-acting propranolol tablets to suppress the vibe.

"Thanks. A creepy guy was staring at me and you look safe."

I almost laughed, but managed not to, as she'd unwittingly walked into the lion's -- or, more accurately, Tiger's -- den. She had a charming, youthful appearance and could be anywhere from fourteen to eighteen, had wavy chestnut hair which fell just below her shoulders, sparkling hazel eyes, and freckles. She was dressed in a quirky outfit -- faded blue jeans, a vintage blouse with ruffles, and some kind of lace vest which accented the swell of her small breasts.

"You're flying alone?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm going to see my dad in Chicago. He gets Christmas this year."

"I'm Steve," I said.

"Emma," she replied. "Are you from Chicago?"

"I am. Where's your original home?"

"San Fran," she replied. "Dad moved to Chicago when my parents divorced when I was twelve."

"Mind if I ask how old you are?"

"Sixteen. You're about thirty, right?"

"Thirty-nine, actually."

"You don't look it, that's for sure! You're in pretty good shape. Gym rat?"

"Martial arts instructor," I replied. "I hold a 6th Dan in Shōtōkan karate."

"6th degree black belt? Wow!"

"Yes, though 'Dan' is the correct term."

"You're not a teacher, are you?" she asked accusingly. "You sound like a teacher."

"I'm a software engineer for a company I helped found in Chicago. I didn't mean to correct you."

"Sure you did! Otherwise you wouldn't have done it!"

"Busted," I chuckled. I apologize for the affront."

"I'll forgive you, this time!"

"Thank you. Are you OK to continue to talk or would that be creepy?"

She laughed softly, "You aren't staring and you're acting normal."

"Perhaps that's my evil super power! Pretending to be normal!"

"IS that your evil super power?"

"Well, given my sister and closest friends would insist that I'm anything but normal, maybe it is! What's your evil super power?"

"Who says I have one?" she countered.

"Me!" I chuckled.

"I don't reveal that to just anyone! Otherwise, how could I ever achieve world domination! I mean, every time the 'evil genius' tells the 'hero' his plan, the 'hero' manages to escape and thwart it! That's just dumb! It's like Bond villains -- they all have a fatal flaw that ensures Bond will win."

"Very true," I agreed. "So do most villains in literature, because people want to see good conquer evil, even if the outcome is forced and the plot is weak."

"And that's why I prefer Greek tragedy -- the protagonist has the fatal flaw that leads to his own downfall."

"What else do you like to read?"

"Russian literature and Heinlein, among other things."

"I'd ask if you've been spying on me, because Heinlein is one of my favorite authors and I love Russian literature."

"Let me guess -- *Stranger in a Strange Land*?" Emma asked.

"Yes. A book I recommend to everyone I mentor and all my karate students."

"It's awesome. What Russian works?"

"*Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, War and Peace*, and a bunch of others."

"Have you been to Russia?" Emma asked.

"Yes, several times, including when it was still the Soviet Union. I have a number of close friends who are Russian. A young woman I mentor is working on a degree in Russian history and is going to attend graduate school in Russia."

"That's cool! Where else have you been?"

"All over the world -- most of northern Europe, England, Japan, Singapore, Australia, Columbia, Brazil, and Argentina, plus Canada and Mexico. I lived in Sweden for a year when I was your age. Have you traveled?"

"Only in the US."

"What else do you do besides read?" I asked.

"I write and I love photography as well. Do you have hobbies?"

"Work and karate consume most of my time," I replied. "I do keep a journal, and if I had to name a hobby, it would be travel. Have you been to Chicago before?"

"Just once, two years ago, for Christmas," Emma replied. "Otherwise, my dad comes to California to see me. He and my mom get along reasonably well."

Passengers waiting on American Airlines Flight 1183 to Chicago, your flight will now depart at 11:30pm, and arrive in Chicago at 6:02am. We're sorry for the inconvenience.

That was a delay of about seven hours, something I was not happy about nor looking forward to.

"Ugh," Emma exclaimed, echoing my thoughts.

"Do you need to borrow my mobile phone to call your dad?"

"Yeah, I probably should."

I fished the phone from my pocket and handed it to her. She opened it, dialed, and I heard only one side of the conversation.

"Hi, Dad, it's Emma...No, I'm not in Chicago, someone lent me a cellphone...My flight is delayed and won't leave until 11:30pm...6:02am...I guess on the plane...OK...Yes...Luv ya...Bye."

She closed the phone and handed it back.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome. Excuse me for a moment while I make a similar call."

"Calling your dad to tell him you'll be late?" she asked with a silly smile.

I chuckled, "I said similar, not identical!"

Given school was out, and it was after 5:00pm in Chicago, which meant Jessica was home, I dialed the main house number.

"Adams residence! Ashley speaking!"

"Hi, Ashley. It's Dad."

"I can read the CallerID!" Ashley exclaimed.

"Hi, Dad! How are you?" I teased.

"Hi, Dad! How are you?" she repeated gruffly.

"Fine. My flight is delayed and turned into a 'red eye'. If they keep the schedule, I'll be home between 7:30am and 8:30am."

"I'll let Mom and Kara Mom know; or did you need to talk to them?"

"You can tell them. Your mom already knows the flight was delayed, just not by how much."

"She told us. See you tomorrow! Love you!"

"Love you, too, Cinderella! See you tomorrow!"

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up.

"The plot thickens!" Emma exclaimed. "He has at least one kid, probably more, and is probably divorced, but might have remarried."

"Mind sharing how you came to that conclusion? I mean, about being divorced and possibly remarried?"

"You said 'your mom' with a stress on the words which implied that there is at least one other kid with a different mom. Logically, if that's true, and you're ethical, which I believe you are, then you married Ashley's mom, either before or after she was born. Given you spoke to her as if she was an adult, she's a teenager, confirmed by the fact that she obviously said something other than a

greeting when you said it was 'Dad' calling. You're almost forty, and not from either coast, so she's probably a middle kid, because people in the Midwest, Great Plains, and the South marry younger than people in California or the North East."

"Logical, internally consistent, and wrong," I replied with a grin. "Because I know something you don't know."

"That you're not left-handed?" Emma asked with a smirk.

"Truly, you have a dizzying intellect!" I declared.

"Before you tell me what I got wrong, mind if I ask what seat you have?"

"5B," I replied. "Why?"

"I was wondering if I could sit next to you on the flight."

"What seat do you have?"

"32A."

I had more than enough miles and segment upgrades that I wouldn't notice using four segment upgrades, each for five hundred miles, to switch her to a seat in First Class. Given a third of the passengers had been rescheduled for the morning, I suspect, strongly, a seat would be available.

"What's your dad's name?"

"Ken."

"Surname?"

"Thompson. Why?"

In the realm of coincidences, this might be another one of those weird ones that seemed to occur with regularity in my life. But that was for later, as I had something more important to accomplish at the moment.

"Let me have your boarding pass and come with me. Follow my lead; I'm sure you'll understand what to say, if anything."

She got her pass from her purse, and handed it to me, then we got up and she followed me to the check-in desk. We each took our carry-on bag with us, lest airport security decide to grab them, despite it being less than twenty feet from where we were.

"Hi," I said to the gate agent, handing her our tickets and my Executive Platinum frequent-flyer card. "I ran into the daughter of a friend in Chicago, Mr. Ken Thompson, and I'd like to upgrade Miss Thompson to First Class with a seat next to me."

"Miles or segments?" the agent asked.

"Segments, please."

She tapped keys on her keyboard, nodded, tore up the old boarding passes, and printed new ones.

"Seats 4A and B," the agent said. "Is there anything else?"

"No, thank you, though I am curious about the conversion to a 'red eye'."

"We had a delay long enough that the crew scheduled for the flight would have gone over the time limit, so we needed a new crew, and that's what the computer decided to do based on crew availability and equipment."

Which meant they needed the MD-80 in Chicago for a flight tomorrow morning, and that, combined with it being Christmas Eve, had resulted in a lengthy delay rather than outright cancelation.

"Thanks," I said.

We stepped away from the counter and I handed the new boarding pass to Emma.

"First Class? I've never been!"

"It's not as impressive on domestic flights as it is on international flights, but the seats are nicer and the food is a bit better. That said, on a 'red eye' most passengers sleep. Anyway, we have at least five hours to kill, and the Admiral's Club is way more comfortable than the gate area. I'm allowed a companion, if you'd like to come with me. There's food, drinks, more comfortable chairs, more TV options, and so on. It's not public, but there are plenty of airline employees around."

"If I thought you were creepy, I wouldn't have asked to sit next to you on the flight!"

We left the gate and headed for the Admiral's Club, where my status allowed Emma to join me for free. We found a pair of comfortable chairs, put down our bags, then got bottles of water from the fridge. Bottles in hand, we sat down side-by-side in the chairs.

"So... 'logical, internally consistent, and wrong'?" Emma prompted.

I didn't know the young woman very well, and didn't want to do anything to make her feel uncomfortable, so I followed our new 'circumspect' policy.

"Ashley, who I also call Cinderella, is eleven, and my youngest. I am married, but my family relationship is complicated. Your comment about how I spoke to her is about parenting style -- my kids are treated as the independent individuals they are, and given extensive freedom to manage their own lives."

"How many kids do you have?"

"My wife and I have two kids," I replied. "I have others by other women."

"Married and divorced?"

"No. As I said, it's a complicated set of relationships."

"How old is your eldest?"

"Sixteen; his seventeenth birthday is in February."

"You were young. I'm the eldest of two and my dad will be fifty in March. I'm going to guess your sixteen-year-old is not your wife's son, if he's the eldest and your youngest is eleven, implying kids in between."

"Who taught you logic, reasoning, and analysis?"

"My dad. He's general counsel for a company in Chicago."

"Spurgeon Capital, right?"

"How could you possibly know that?!" she asked, surprised.

"To quote my youngest daughter, 'I think and I know things!' I'm close friends with Samantha Spurgeon, and your dad's assistant is the mom of a girl I dated in High School with whom I'm very close friends."

"Mrs. Spencer?"

"Yes. I dated her daughter Melanie for about a year. Melanie is a criminal defense attorney in Chicago and her husband is..."

"A US Marshal," Emma said, interrupting me.

"Yes. I'll say 'small world' again for the second time in the past two hours."

"Oh?"

"The guy who was sitting next to me before they rebooked people with connecting flights is a doctor from Ohio who knows my wife, and who taught another friend who's also a doctor."

"What kind of doctor is your wife?"

"A trauma surgeon at UofC Hospital."

"My mom is an Attending in Pediatrics at Stanford."

"My eldest son's mom and several friends have gone to Stanford. Where did your mom go to medical school?"

"Indiana University."

"Do you know what year?"

"She's about eight years younger than my dad, so I think it would be..."

"The same time my wife was there," I said, interrupting Emma. "I bet you anything your mom knows Doctor Jessica Adams, née Wilton. They would have been in medical school together there. What's your mom's name?"

"Diana Dietz."

"I'm pretty sure I met her at a social event held by one of her professors, Doctor Al Barton, who's my father-in-law."

"He's one of mom's doctor friends! This is just too weird! It's like eddies in the currents of time conspired to bring us to this point!"

"Or Loki is just doing his usual thing in my life!" I chuckled.

"The Norse god, right?"

"Yes. I prefer personifying Fate as Loki, because it fits my life so much better."

"And Loki or Fate brought us together? Are you one of those people who assigns meaning to random events?"

"Seemingly random," I corrected. "Causality, like everything else about the universe, is far more complex than most people believe. There are very few truly random events. There is, in nearly every case, a sequence of events that leads to each situation, even if that sequence is convoluted or hidden."

"But not purposeful, right? As in nobody is actually directing it? Or do you believe in God?"

"I'm an agnostic, and I would say that each individual directs their own fate by making choices, the results of which are a combination of obvious, subtle, and hidden, and may not be discovered until years later, if at all. Each choice you made in your life, and each choice your parents made, along with my choices, and those of my parents, and so on, creates a complex, intertwining web that led you to ask to sit next to me."

"So, it was fated that we meet?"

"Yes, in the sense that each decision we made led inevitably to this meeting, though despite my personification of that process as Loki, I don't believe it was directed from the outside. We have Free Will, and exercising that Free Will led us to sitting side-by-side in a pair of comfortable chairs in the San Francisco Airport Admiral's Club, waiting on a delayed flight to Chicago.

"I was supposed to, if my plans hadn't changed, fly back to Chicago yesterday, but something came up with a client in San Francisco that required a face-to-face visit, and my sister, who runs my company so I can do what I love to do, suggested that because I was already here, she and my attorneys fly out and we meet today. I agreed, despite the proximity to Christmas and here we are."

"Interesting. Can you predict the future?"

"Only in a probabilistic way," I replied. "In other words, I can tell you what I expect to happen with varying levels of certainty."

"I believe I can predict the future!"

"Really?"

"Absolutely! Want me to give you a prediction that is absolutely certain?"

"Go for it."

"I predict with absolute certainty, that you and I are going to sleep together tonight!"

I started laughing as I recalled a similar jest made by Meredith Caldwell on my flight to Japan eight years in the past.

"What's so funny?" Emma asked.

"Just remembering a young woman I met on a flight to Japan eight years ago who made almost the same exact comment."

"And did you? Sleep together?"

I chuckled, "Yes."

"I'm looking forward to it!" she declared with an impish smile and a twinkle in her eye.

LXVIII. What is it you want?

December 23, 2002, San Francisco, California

 Steve

"Do you always flirt with older men?" I asked with a smile.

"Do you always flirt with underage girls?" Emma asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Touché!" I chuckled. "I'll answer if you will."

"Not usually, but you give off this vibe that you're fun, approachable, and safe."

"I flirt all the time, but I also believe teenagers are adults, as I mentioned before."

"And how often do you sleep with underage girls, hmm?" she asked.

"This will be the second time on a plane!" I declared.

"Right, because *that* is what I meant!"

"Oh, it was, but you left yourself free to switch to the euphemistic answer if I didn't react badly to the implication, which I didn't."

"Which actually proves you aren't a creep!"

"An interesting analysis," I replied. "Care to explain?"

"Three possible responses -- yours, which is neutral; asking me if it was an offer, or assuming it was, which is creepy; denial in a way that makes it clear the accusation was accurate, which could go either way, but not be neutral."

"I'm not sure that analysis is completely correct, but it could inform a complete analysis. Consider, for example, someone who does sleep with underage girls, but doesn't seek them out because they come to him."

"My friend has this problem..." Emma smirked.

I laughed and said gruffly, "Your father has taught you well!"

"You're not my father, Darth! So, reading into your implication, I'm going to sleep with you, but you want to *sleep* with me."

"Physician, heal thyself!" I chuckled.

"You think I want to *sleep* with you?"

"Obviously. But wanting to do something does not imply that you would actually do it."

"Tell me that you didn't upgrade me to First Class because you thought I'd sleep with you, and I don't mean on the plane."

"I didn't upgrade you to first class because I thought you'd sleep with me."

"Smart Alec!"

"Always! That said, if you thought that was the case, you accepting the upgrade means you agreed to the transaction!"

Emma laughed, "Wow! Talk about turning things around! And you think that's true?"

"Just applying the same logic you did, and my analysis doesn't depend on my intent, only on what you thought my intent was, and of course, my thinking could change based on your response, and so on."

"Your denial was true?"

"I'll answer truthfully, if you will."

"Sure."

"I absolutely did not upgrade you because I thought you'd sleep with me, or to encourage you to sleep with me. Did I notice that you're sexy? Yes. Did I consider the *possibility* it could lead there? Yes. Was it a *quid pro quo*? No. Was it done in hopes or expectations of a *quid pro quo*? No."

"For real?"

"For real. Your turn."

"I chose to sit next to you because, in addition to what I said before, you're handsome and in great shape. Only a blind girl wouldn't notice that! And when I asked you to sit next to you on the plane, I didn't think anything of it other than changing seats. But then you asked the agent for an upgrade, and you had to use your frequent flyer points, or whatever. When I heard that, I was positive you did that in the expectation that I'd sleep with you. I thought about objecting, but then decided to accept and see what happened."

"And?" I prompted.

"If I answer that, I'm basically committing myself!"

"No, you aren't. That is one thing nobody can irrevocably commit to under any circumstances. 'No' is always an answer, at any time, period, no matter how many times you've said 'yes' before that."

"I'll answer," Emma replied, "but you have to answer my question."

"A reasonable trade."

"When we left the counter, I decided if you asked, I'd say 'yes'. My question -- DO you sleep with underage girls?"

"I have. But I'm not kidding about them approaching me."

"And you want to sleep with me?"

"I'm certainly attracted and intrigued. My turn for a question -- now that you know it's not a *quid pro quo*, is your answer any different?"

"You mean do I now have a burning desire to drag you to bed? Yes! The same one you have for me!"

"And the fact that I'm married?"

"Is between you and your wife, but I get the sense from the limited information you've shared that your marriage isn't exactly traditional."

"Mind if I ask why your parents split up?"

"Officially, it was 'irreconcilable differences', but I found out what actually happened. My mom had an affair with a doctor. My dad and the doctor's wife

found out; my dad divorced my mom, and the doctor's wife forgave him and took him back."

"How badly did it affect you?"

"I was really upset, and at eleven, I totally didn't understand why my dad suddenly moved out and then took the job in Chicago, with the divorce being final just after I turned twelve. They both worked hard to make me understand it wasn't my fault, but like most kids that age, I thought it had more to do with me than it did. I found out the details later, and that changed my views."

"I'm interested in hearing your take."

"Both of them are to blame. Mom for being married to her effing job, and not having enough time for my dad, which if anything, I would have expected he would have cheated because, well, you get the picture of what didn't happen."

I chuckled, "Most kids, even adult kids, are reluctant to consider their parents' sex lives. Sorry to interrupt; go on."

"So, in my mind, Dad actually had a reason to cheat, and mom didn't, because she was the one who was always working. Mom should never have cheated, and actually come home to my dad. I blame him for not being man enough to forgive her and for throwing away thirteen years of marriage."

"I'm not sure it's about being 'man enough' -- some people are predisposed to being able to forgive, and others find it nearly impossible. And a lot depends on the person who cheated showing true «metanoia»."

"Greek, again?"

"Yes. And it means repentance, but includes the idea of turning around, or reforming one's ways, in addition to being sorry. If your mom was truly sorry, then I think you have firmer ground on which to stand."

"I think she was only sorry she got caught," Emma said. "Anyway, my problem with my dad not being willing to forgive her is that he was, from everything I know, a playboy before he got married, and I mean, he had more girls than you can shake a...stick at!"

I laughed, "Nice pause for effect to imply something else!"

"Thanks. Anyway, mom was a virgin on their wedding night and dad had slept with dozens of girls, including, I'm reasonably certain, my aunt right around the time he asked my mom, her younger sister, out."

If what Emma was saying was accurate, it answered a question I'd asked myself in 1985 -- whether Jessica's assessment of her friend Diana's promiscuity was accurate. I'd questioned it because Diana had seemed socially awkward at the gathering at Doctor Barton's house. Of course, Diana could also have misled her daughter, and possibly her husband.

"Aren't vows important?" I asked.

"Right, because there are no divorces in the world and every marriage is 'until death do us part!'"

"If you use the traditional vows, yes," I replied. "Not everyone does. And while I try always to be a man of my word, I can see circumstances where divorce might be the right course of action. And you're dancing around a subject that I know has to be floating in your mind."

"You mean sleeping with you when you'd be cheating on your wife?"

"That would be the one," I confirmed.

"That's between you and her. I didn't make any promises, and I'd only expect you to keep promises you made to me."

"And if your mom promised to 'forsake all others', which I assume she did?" I asked.

"I still say he should have tried to work things out with her. But it's water under the bridge at this point."

"So you'd be OK with sleeping with a married man?"

"Asks the man who is OK with sleeping with an underage girl! At least MY thinking isn't breaking the law."

"Two very different points. I personally do not care what society thinks, and so long as you aren't going to report me, the risk is infinitesimal. On the other hand, I do care about keeping my word."

"I may only be sixteen, but even I can figure out that if you're married, and you sleep with me, you're violating your vows!"

"Once again, your analysis is logical, consistent, and wrong!"

"How so?"

"It's more complicated than this, but allow me to give you the simple version. If you recall, I'm married to a trauma surgeon. We met when she was in medical school at Indiana University, and we lived separately, mostly only seeing each other on weekends, and during a pair of visiting student rotations. When we

married, and she chased me, by the way, she said she wanted a husband who would, to quote her, look good on her arm and curl her toes, but wouldn't interfere with her medical career. In exchange, she offered freedom to have what were called 'dalliances'. So, no, I wouldn't be cheating."

"That's really true? Your wife gave you permission to have sex with other girls?"

"Yes. So, as I said, I wouldn't be cheating. Does that make it less exciting for you?"

Emma laughed, "You think that was part of the thrill? Enticing another woman's husband into sleeping with me?"

"I have known a few young women who have had that idea, and one who thought doing so would lead to her replacing my wife."

"You don't have to worry about that! If I get married, it'll be a decade from now, or more!"

"What's in your future?"

"A flight to Chicago, sleeping with you, and then *sleeping* with you!"

I chuckled, "An answer I'd give! I meant longer term!"

"Law and medicine are out! I saw enough from both my mom and dad to rule those out! I like nice things, so being a surf bum in Malibu is out, and the last thing I'd do is join the military."

"A non-answer! All you did is rule things out!"

"I haven't decided. I'm interested in computers, but I'm not sure I want to program for the rest of my life."

"So don't. My company has systems engineers who build, deploy, and maintain servers, as well as network engineers who design, deploy, and maintain computer networks. There are plenty of jobs in computers that don't involve programming, though that is what I prefer doing."

"How long have you been at your company? Well, you said you founded it, but when?"

"In 1985, right after graduation, four friends and I founded the company."

"That sounds like a Silicon Valley thing, though you'd have dropped out of college instead!"

"I could have, and could have even not gone at all, as I had a profitable computer business in High School with two friends, one of whom is on our Board of Directors, but was working on her Master's when we founded the company and prefers doing research at UofI to working for us. We sold that original company to pay for college."

"Computer company in High School is *totally* Silicon Valley! I saw the top-level frequent flyer card and your Amex Platinum, so you're obviously successful."

"Or leveraged to the hilt!"

"I don't think that fits you."

"You seem to read people pretty well," I replied.

"You, too. My dad taught me to be a good judge of people by playing poker, starting when I was seven!"

I chuckled, "Let me guess, Texas Hold 'Em?"

"Yes. He plays in the World Series of Poker every year. He finished in the money a couple of times, but never made a final table. I take it you play?"

"Yes, with some friends a couple of times a month, but I learned to read people before I started playing Hold 'Em."

"How?"

"A mix of things, but being a karate instructor and working with teens and young adults, raising my kids, and, probably most importantly, having what we called 'rap sessions' which were basically groups of people discussing philosophy. I actually led some seminars at San Diego State and at UofC Medical School."

"So you *are* a teacher!"

"Not the way you meant! I don't have a teaching job, unless you count being a karate instructor. I've led seminars, but as a layman, not a professional educator. The mother of two of my kids is a chemistry professor."

"I think it's time to fess up by what you mean by 'complicated'! I get the sense you haven't given me the whole story."

"Well, Alice, are you ready to step through the looking glass?"

"Given I already agreed to sleep with you in both meanings of the word, what do you think?"

"I think you're a very intelligent young woman who is easily my intellectual equal!"

Emma looked surprised, "Nobody has ever said anything like that to me!"

"Because, going back to what I said before, I treat teenagers as if they were adults, because they are! Young adults, of course, but still adults."

"And the answer?"

I smiled, pulled my wallet from my pocket, and removed the small plastic insert that contained my photos. Starting with the 'family' picture, which included my wives, all the kids, the other moms, and my girlfriends, I pointed to each person and identified them and the relationship. Emma was wide-eyed the entire time and shook her head several times.

"What did I walk into by sitting down next to you?"

"An alternate universe," I chuckled. "Through the looking glass, as I said!"

"And with all those hot women in your house, you need more?"

"A better way to understand it is to say that I reject traditional views about sex and monogamy, and have a very different understanding of what physical intimacy signifies."

"A theme, though not directly stated, in *Stranger in a Strange Land* is that true intimacy is intellectual or spiritual, not physical."

"Exactly. If you got THAT from Heinlein, you're way ahead of the average person, and I might have been too cautious in saying you're my intellectual equal."

"Why?"

"Because if you figured that out at age sixteen, you're at least a decade ahead of me in terms of your philosophical journey, compared to where I was at sixteen. I mentioned my trip to Japan, which was in the mid-90s. That's when I achieved some semblance of enlightenment, so I was nearly twenty years older than you are. I bet you have trouble in school."

"I'd like to hear what you think before I answer."

"You've been told, at one time or another, that you ask too many questions or are 'too smart for your own good' because you challenge teachers and refuse to accept the pabulum that passes for education. You get good grades in spite of your intellectual skills, not because of them, because you understand you have to repeat the pabulum back, even if you don't agree. How close am I?"

"Spot on. Math and science aren't too bad, because there isn't any real disagreement about two plus two or the geometric proofs or chemical formulas. Everything else is a battle because my teachers are, and I'll say this to you, complete morons."

"Been there, done that, got the t-shirt," I chuckled. "My kids have the same opinion of most of their teachers because they've been trained in the Socratic method, and like him, are royal pains in the butt to people who pretend to know the truth when they couldn't find their butt with both hands or empty piss from a boot with the instructions printed on the heel!"

Emma laughed, "I say things like they couldn't make ice cubes if they had the recipe! And I bet anything you care to wager, you could find *my* butt with both hands!"

"You'd win that bet! I want to ask a question and I hope you'll take it in the correct way, and understand that a truthful answer will not upset me in any way."

"What?"

"One possibility is that you feel completely safe in the airport and on the plane, so you're flirting with no intent, because it's fun and safe and you can. The other possibility is that you're serious. Well, or it's possible you're somewhere between those two positions."

Emma smiled, "Let me answer this way -- unless you've changed your mind, or your stable of women object in some way, you and I will make the beast with two backs repeatedly before I fly home in early January."

I couldn't help but laugh, thinking back to saying that to Melanie Spencer during the summer of 1977, when we were on the way to the lake house where I'd met Michelle and Elizabeth Parker, and had taken the first real steps on the path of the sexual odyssey that was my life.

"What's so funny?" Emma demanded, though her eyes conveyed that she was teasing.

"I used that phrase, before you were born, with Trudy Spencer's daughter and she started beating on me in the back seat of the car. That might have been because her parents were in the front seat!"

Emma laughed, "Too funny. I take it you were teasing her and that Mr. and Mrs. Spencer were totally cool?"

"That is the correct take. Melanie stuck her tongue out at me and I told her not to do that unless she intended to use it, and she threatened to not sleep with me that night!"

"An empty threat?"

"Yes."

"Stick your tongue out at me!" Emma commanded with a twinkle in her eye.

I did as commanded and received the expected response.

"Don't stick it out unless you intend to use it!" she said with a smirk.

"Until you can't stand it!" I declared.

"And, of course, reciprocity is required?"

"Required? Never. Not that I'd say 'no', but my strategy, and it's been extremely successful, is to do what the girl wants, when she wants, and how she wants."

Emma winked, stuck her tongue out, then licked her lips and pretended to swallow. One thing was certain, this young woman did NOT need a mindfuck, and perhaps that was because SHE was the one engaging in the mindfuck!

"Always?" Emma asked.

"Always. I do have to ask -- do you have a boyfriend?"

"Boys my age are complete idiots! And my mom would never understand me having an older, steady boyfriend!"

Which I could read in several ways, but all indications were that Emma had some experience, and that she'd dated older guys, which fit her personality and intellect.

"I've heard that lament before," I said. "Including from my teenage daughter."

"To answer your next question," Emma said with a smirk, "Mom put me on the Pill when I turned fifteen. Dad felt it was license, but mom felt it was common sense."

"I agree with your mom," I replied. "My girls know it's up to them, both in terms of taking birth control and how they conduct their lives. That said, we do have three firm rules, which nobody in the house may violate. The first is that everyone has to use birth control, which, for me, is covered by a vasectomy I had shortly after my youngest daughter was born. The second rule is that everyone has to have regular STI tests. The third is that everyone has to verify their partners have had recent STI tests."

"That sounds like my mom," Emma said. "She's a stickler for telling teens to get tested and ensure their partners are tested because, as she says, you are, in effect, having sex with anyone your partner has been with."

"Which means you have had an STI test?"

"Every year at my gynecological exam, most recently in late October, right after my birthday."

Which, of course, fit perfectly with being 'Luckiest Dumb Boy', which would only be enhanced if Emma were a virgin, but I did not get that vibe. Of course,

with her personality, anything was possible, and I had no idea. In the end, though, that wasn't a particularly relevant point.

"I'm not sure I'd put it the same way your mom did," I said, "but I agree with the sentiment. Your risk profile is based on everyone you have sex with, along with everyone they've had sex with, all the way down the chain, impacted by IV drug use, risky sexual activity, and before the late 80s, blood transfusions or open surgical procedures."

"I think my mom's comment is more effective for more teenagers."

"I agree, but I'm nothing if not pedantic!"

"I've been accused of that by a few teachers when I tried to make important points about what they felt were irrelevant distinctions. They were wrong."

"Now you sound like Birgit," I chuckled.

"Your eldest daughter, right?"

"We don't call her the Empress of the Universe without good cause! Of course, she's unable to completely bend the universe to her will, no matter how hard she tries!"

"Do you call her 'Princess'? My dad called me that until the divorce."

"No. I call her 'Pumpkin' because when she was a baby she had an orange onesie and looked for all the world like a pumpkin when she was curled up."

"And Ashley/Cinderella. Do your other kids have nicknames?"

"Jesse is 'Ducky' or 'Little Duck' despite being taller than me, because he was a fan of the *Mighty Ducks* TV show and the Anaheim Mighty Ducks hockey team. Matthew is 'Foo', though we don't use it very often, because his little sister called him 'Ma-foo' when she began speaking. Stephe is 'Bunny Rabbit', because she was completely enamored with bunnies she saw at a petting zoo when she was little. Albert won't accept a nickname except from his brother fighter pilots when he gets his wings, so we don't even try! Michael never had a nickname, and I can't tell you why. We briefly called him 'Mickey' because he had a Mickey Mouse plush, but the name never stuck."

"And your nickname?" Emma asked.

"Jess calls me 'Tiger' and Kara calls me 'Snuggle Bear'."

"And your wives' nicknames?"

"I call Jess 'Babe' and Kara 'Honey', but they aren't nicknames, per se. Suzanne doesn't have one."

Well, Kara and Jess had called her 'hot college pussy', but I didn't think that was appropriate to share!

"What's my nickname?" Emma asked.

"As in, guess what it is? Or assign one?"

"I told you it was 'Princess', but I don't have one now. Assign one!"

"Hmm. Maybe Amelia?"

"Amelia Bedelia?" Emma asked.

"No, a double reference! One I think you ought to know, the other is more doubtful."

"Let me think a bit. What's the doubtful one?"

"The British actress Emma Thompson voiced a character named Amelia in *Treasure Planet* which came out earlier this year."

"OK, how the heck do you know THAT bit of trivia?"

"Movie trivia is my thing," I replied. "You've heard me quote a few popular movies, but I could equally well quote more obscure ones. It's something we call 'Darmok' in my house."

"I can't place that, but I feel as if I should be able to."

"'Darmok and Jalad, at Tanagra'; 'Shaka, when the walls fell'."

She was quiet for about thirty seconds, then her face showed she'd come up with the answer.

"*The Next Generation*, right?"

"Yes. The race that spoke only in metaphor. We do that a lot at home, especially Jesse and me."

"I can't figure out the other reference for 'Amelia'."

"It's actually backwards. You're probably trying to think of some trait or something you said, or that you look like someone with that name."

"And can't come up with anything."

"The name 'Emma' is a diminutive form of 'Amelia'. I bet your name is actually 'Emma', right?"

"Yes. Are you Steve or Steven?"

"Stephen, with a 'ph' instead of a 'v'. You being named Emma is similar to someone naming their child 'Larisa' after the female lead in *Doctor Zhivago*, when her given name is 'Lara', and 'Larisa' is the diminutive. If you don't like Amelia, I can come up with something cute or sassy."

"I'd be very curious to hear a sassy one!"

"Well," I smirked, thinking quickly, "How about 'Charms'?"

"Charms?"

"They made lollipops, or what my dad would call an 'all-day sucker'!"

Emma laughed, "In your dreams!"

"Hey, a man can dream, can't he?! And he'd be happy to reciprocate, simultaneously, even!"

"I bet! Try another!"

"Adriel," I said with a smirk.

"OK, no clue on that one."

"Promise not to hit me?" I asked with a grin.

"NO!" Emma declared.

"It's Diné, that is, Navajo, for 'beaver'."

Emma slugged me in the arm, but she was laughing.

"As if you'd get it after calling me that!" she threatened.

"Melanie Spencer's exact reaction after the 'beast with two backs' comment! Want to try for a third one?"

"You're just thinking these up on the fly?"

"My wit is as quick as yours!" I replied. "Let's try something that won't get me hit! How about «κάστανον» (*kastanon*) or Rayleigh?"

"The first one is Greek, right?"

"Yes. And it means 'chestnut', the color of your hair; the second one is the scientific reason your eyes are called 'hazel' and change colors."

"Talk about going in the opposite direction!"

"I said I wanted to avoid being hit!" I chuckled.

"Not that I could use them, but are your nicknames accurate?"

"Reports suggest they are," I replied. "You never did tell me your evil superpower!"

"You'll find out!" she smirked.

I laughed, "Should I be afraid?"

"I don't know, should you?" she asked with a smirk.

"As I said, a quick wit, rapier-like, even, who holds her own in a wide-ranging conversation!"

"You mentioned food, and I'm a bit hungry."

"Let's see what they have. It's usually a limited buffet, with cold cuts and finger food, along with cookies, and sometimes other desserts."

I realized we probably wouldn't get a meal on the plane, so I suggested to Emma that we eat, but then eat again just before they picked up the buffet, which would be about 9:00pm. Given the selections, I wouldn't be able to completely avoid carbs and get enough to eat, so I took a tablet of fast-acting propranolol.

"Mind if I ask what that was?" Emma inquired.

"It's propranolol, a beta blocker, which I take for a minor health problem. Basically, my body doesn't regulate hormones properly, and eating sugar in any form, including complex carbohydrates, exacerbates the problem. If I avoid carbs, there is literally no effect. Because this buffet doesn't cater to low-carb, I took a fast-acting version of the drug to counteract the effects."

"So why not just take the drug all the time?"

"You know the vibe you mentioned earlier that I give off?"

"Yes."

"It attenuates that."

"So, if you take it, you don't attract teenage girls who want to make the beast with two backs?"

"An accurate assessment, but it also makes me feel a little sluggish, which I don't like. I'm generally opposed to using any kind of drugs, legal or otherwise, and because I can maintain my health by modifying my diet, I do that instead. A chef friend has developed a number of recipes to help, including cake made with almond flour and Stevia, a plant-based sweetener that is not glucose or fructose. I can eat any meat, any green vegetables, berries, salads, and so on. It's not a boring diet by any means, but it does mean no grains, including pasta, potatoes, or corn."

"We eat a lot of stir fry at home, mostly chicken with different kinds of vegetables and sauces, and brown rice. It's easy to make, and healthy. Dad is more into steaks and burgers, which are OK on occasion."

We took our food back to our seats and sat down.

"How long before the vibe stops?" she asked.

"It's fast-acting, so minutes. Don't ask me how or why, because the doctors don't know."

"So when it wears off, I'll change my mind again?"

"I don't know, actually. What makes you think you might?"

"Because what I told you before was only part of what I felt. I also heard this voice inside my head screaming 'you *need* to sleep with this guy' and I had a physical reaction!"

"I suppose all you can do is wait and see."

"How long does it last?"

"Twenty or thirty minutes," I replied. "And the pill's effects last about two hours."

Emma laughed, "Braggart!"

"The proof of the pudding is in the tasting!" I declared.

"And you want me to taste your pudding!" Emma smirked.

"You are really quick with those comebacks! Skipping to the end, how do you propose to get together while you're in Chicago?"

"Dad will let me do my own thing," she said. "So I can pretty much come and go as I please, so long as I'm with him for Christmas."

"Where does he live?"

"A condo on the Gold Coast."

"Has he re-married?"

"No. He has a girlfriend, so I'm sure he'll be happy if I make myself scarce. I don't particularly like her, but then again, I don't like my mom's boyfriend, either. Where do you live?"

"Kenwood, but we often say 'Hyde Park' because more people know that's the neighborhood around UofC, where both Jessica and Kara work, and where my girlfriends attend college and four of my kids the Lab School."

"I take it you have someplace private we could be together?"

I actually did, as the NIKA apartment was not being used. I had reserved it for my parents, but they were staying with Al Barton, and everyone else had booked hotels.

"I do," I replied. "Let me just confirm."

I pulled out my Blackberry and send a message to Kimmy who responded in less than a minute, saying nobody had asked about the apartment and nobody was going to be in town.

"All set," I said. "My company maintains an apartment we use for staff who come to Chicago from out of town, and nobody is there between Christmas and New Year's."

"I don't think my dad will accept a sleepover."

"No surprise, and that works OK. The only days that are completely out right now are Boxing Day and New Year's Eve. How about Saturday?"

"Pick me up at 7:00am and have me home by 1:00am?"

"Sounds good. Breakfast together on Saturday?"

"Sure."

"Great!"

I gave her one of my business cards that had both my work and home details, and then entered her dad's address and phone into my Blackberry, which would sync them to the server in the office.

"I'll be in the lobby at 7:00am on Saturday," she said. "I'll call if there are any complications."

"Same here," I replied.

When we finished eating, we both elected to read, stopping to get more food before they closed the buffet, and finally making our way to the gate at 10:00pm for the 11:15pm flight. Fortunately, there were no further delays, and we boarded first, stowing our bags in the overhead bin, then sitting down with me in 4A by the window, and Emma in 4B by the aisle.

After takeoff, the cabin crew immediately handed out blankets and pillows, then turned down the cabin lights so everyone could sleep. I reclined my seat and pulled the lightweight blanket over me, and Emma did the same.

"Don't I get a good-night kiss?" she asked.

I nodded and turned so we could kiss. We allowed our lips to touch briefly, then both made ourselves comfortable to sleep.



December 24, 2002, Christmas Eve, Chicago, Illinois

"I enjoyed sleeping with you!" Emma declared after we deplaned in Chicago.

"Same!" I agreed.

"We should probably say 'goodbye' now, rather than have my dad be concerned."

"How do you want to say 'goodbye'?" I asked.

Emma's response was to put her bag down, step very close, and put her arms around me. I dropped my bag, put my arms around her, and pulled her tight against me. We exchanged a soft kiss, but didn't linger too long, nor turn it into a French kiss, to avoid making a spectacle. She broke the kiss and moved her lips next to my ear.

"I think I'm going to REALLY enjoy *sleeping* with you!" she whispered.

"Same!" I replied.

We hugged tightly, exchanged another quick kiss, then made our way to the secure exit, where Emma saw her dad and hurried to him without glancing back. I knew I had to play it cool, so I didn't turn my head, but watched from the corner of my eye as they hugged and moved towards the baggage claim. I headed for the airport tram, rode it to long-term parking, got into my car, and headed home.

Forty minutes later, I pulled into the driveway, happy I'd made it home and not been stuck longer in California. I grabbed my bag, got out of the car and walked into the house where I was nearly bowled over by a young woman throwing her arms around me and hugging me.

"Cuddle time!" Birgit declared.

"Will Her Royal Highness deign to allow me to greet my wives, girlfriends, and other children?"

"I suppose," Birgit replied. "I'll take your bag and start your laundry while you do that."

She took the bag from me and I went to find the rest of the family, who were all

in the dining room eating breakfast.

"Hi, beautiful wives!" I exclaimed. "Hi young ladies, and kids!"

My wives, Natalie, Yuriko, Stephanie, and Ashley all got up to hug and kiss me, but Albert, being his usual self, simply acknowledged me and stayed sitting.

"How was your flight?" Jessica asked. "Could you talk to Ghost?"

"No. They rebooked him on a flight this morning. I think they were considering canceling the flight altogether, because they ran over crew time limits, but then they decided they needed the equipment here in Chicago, so assigned a new crew."

"Did you have breakfast, Steve-sama?" Yuriko asked.

"No, but I was accosted by a certain Empress of the Universe, and I believe if I eat before I cuddle her, I won't live to see Christmas!"

Everyone at the table laughed, and I went to the sunroom, where my eldest daughter joined me about a minute later.

"I missed you, Dad!" she said as she snuggled close.

"I missed you, too, Pumpkin!"

"Rachel invited Tiff, Naomi, Hannah, and me to come to Saint Martin with her and Javon during Spring Break."

"Before I respond on point, have you discussed this with your moms?"

"Yes, and I am *not* looking for a different answer! Mom said I needed to discuss it

with you!"

"OK. I thought you were going to New York."

"I can change those plans, and Marcella will understand. She has a girlfriend now, so it's not like it was before."

"Then I don't have a problem with you going. After all, you're going to Japan next Summer! What do you need to discuss?"

"The girls all asked their parents, and all three sets said that in order to go, adults would have to go along, and Javon and Rachel don't count, even though they're eighteen and nineteen. I thought you and Mom would go."

"I'll discuss it with your mom," I said. "I could take my vacation then."

"Yes! I'd like Bob to come along, but his parents need to talk to you and Samantha."

"The picture becomes clear now," I chuckled.

"Oh, stop! And besides, you don't know the *real* reason!"

"What's the real reason, Pumpkin?"

"Tiffany, Naomi, and Hannah will all be fifteen by then! You'll have a VERY good time!"

"Pumpkin..." I warned.

"I didn't do anything!" Birgit protested. "It was Hannah's idea once Rachel suggested we all go with to Saint Martin! Hannah asked me ages ago about you,

and I told her she had to talk to my moms; she talked to Mom yesterday."

"I sense a conspiracy!" I chuckled.

"Oh, please! You know Tiffany wants to and her mom even said it was OK!"

"Not quite, but she also didn't object. And that's enough of this discussion, Pumpkin. You know the rules."

"Honest, Dad! No coupons and no encouragement. They heard from Rachel how awesome it was! I'm jealous, but I know your answer, so Bob will have to substitute!"

"Let me talk to your moms and we'll let you know."

We cuddled for about ten minutes, then I went to the kitchen and Yuriko served me a breakfast of bacon and eggs, and then I went up to my room to shower and change, something I should have done right away, given I'd been in the same clothes for over twenty-four hours.

"How was San Francisco?" Kara, who along with Jessica and Suzanne, had come upstairs with me, asked.

"Great! Keiki and I had some very good talks, and she's ready to start at Stanford in the Fall. She did mention wanting to visit over the Summer."

"Of course she did!" Jessica said, laughing. "I suppose that will work because Yuriko is going to Japan and Natalie is going to Russia."

"I also met a new girl," I replied. "Her name is Raven."

"Mindfuck?" Kara asked with a smirk.

"Yes, then the other kind."

"And?"

"A fun, twenty-two-year-old virgin who is now a subversive. Her dad owns the livery company that provided rides for me and for Stephanie and Liz."

"Tiger strikes again!" Jessica declared. "Is there an investment opportunity?"

"Steve already made several deposits!" Suzanne teased, causing the rest of us to laugh.

"I didn't meet her dad, but it's a going business and they seem successful, so at this point, I'd say 'no'. That said, if I get a hint from Raven that they need capital, we'll talk. I did have an overnight with her, though it wasn't planned, and only happened because of the meeting yesterday morning. By the time I knew, it was after midnight here."

"I don't think that's a violation," Jessica observed. "It's when you would otherwise be with one of us and didn't ask that it would be a violation of our agreement."

"And yet, I'll report those near transgressions to ensure we don't have any miscommunication."

"We appreciate that!" Kara declared. "Anyone else?"

I chuckled, "My reputation precedes me. I met a sixteen-year-old girl while waiting for the flight. Jess, she's the daughter of Diana Dietz."

"Diana Dietz from IU Medical School?"

"One and the same," I replied.

"NO WAY!" Jessica exclaimed.

"Yes, way," I chuckled. "She struck up a conversation, and we spent several hours talking. I upgraded her seat so she could sit with me in First Class and she wants to see me while she's in Chicago."

'*Another* mind fuck?' Suzanne asked.

"If so, she was the one administering it! I commented that she was very intelligent and at least my intellectual equal. It would be like someone meeting Birgit in that way."

"Loki help them!" Kara declared, causing the rest of us to laugh.

"Speaking of our eldest daughter, she asked about Saint Martin."

"Did she tell you Hannah came to speak to me yesterday?" Kara asked.

"Yes."

"It's perfect, Tiger! Those three girls get what they want, away from prying eyes!"

"Except Kara's!" I chuckled.

"A girl can dream, right?" Kara asked impishly.

"She can, but you know that can't be a condition."

"It wasn't, Snuggle Bear. I didn't even mention it."

"I think we can go," I said. "You'll need to talk to their moms, and you need to speak to both Naomi and Tiffany."

"Hannah said Naomi will come speak to me, but Tiffany doesn't turn fifteen until March."

"I think you can make an exception to what Suzanne told her," I said.

I finished in the shower, dried off, and then got dressed.

"Our usual Christmas celebration tonight adding Suzanne?" Jessica asked.

"That's what I intended," I replied. "I did change my dinner plans for last night to Friday, and I plan to meet Emma, the girl from the flight, on Saturday, unless there are any objections. Not an overnight."

None of them had any, so we left the room and went downstairs. We'd just reached the landing when I heard a knock at the front door and went to answer it.

"Can I help you?" I asked a man who looked vaguely familiar.

"Maybe. My name is Steve Samet, and I'm looking for Ray Adams, whose name is on the deed to this house."

"That's my dad, but he doesn't live here. I'm his son, Steve. May I ask what's this is about?"

"If you'll indulge me another question first?"

"You can ask, but I can't promise I'll answer."

"It's actually a few questions. First, is his birthday August 27, 1917?"

"Yes," I said warily.

"And his birth name was Lewis Betram Tobias?"

"I can't answer that question," I said quickly and firmly.

"And he went by Lewis B. Hano before changing his name to Ray Charles Adams?"

"Again, I cannot answer that question. What is it you want?"

"My birth name is Steven Marc Hano, and my dad is Lewis B. Hano, who was born Lewis Bertram Tobias. I'm absolutely certain you're my half-brother."