

GOOD MEDICINE

Book 4: Senior Year



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MICHAEL LOUCKS

Senior Year

Book 4 of *Good Medicine*

by Michael Loucks

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Сам Себя Издат

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

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I. Ultraviolet

May 25, 1984, West Monroe, Ohio

"Hi, Mikey!" Liz exclaimed when Clarissa and I walked into my parents' house on Friday afternoon.

"How is my newly graduated sister?"

"Stoked! I'm done with school and moving out of the house! Are you staying the whole weekend?"

"Except for driving Maggie to McKinley tomorrow morning. Am I supposed to bring her back for the party?"

"If you can take her back on Sunday with you, she'll stay at Valerie's on Saturday night."

"It's going to be a bit complicated because Clarissa and I are invited to a small reception for Tasha at her house on Sunday afternoon. We'll spend a couple of hours at Grandpa's house and then head over there. I can't take Maggie there, and I don't want to drive back to Rutherford to get her. Can you bring her here by 6:00pm or so?"

"Sure," Liz agreed. "The thing at Grandpa's house will be done by then. Mom said she wants to talk to you this weekend."

"Good for Mom," I replied flatly. "The weekend is really busy, and you know I have nothing at all to say to her. You're an adult and have been legally one for almost three months. It's up to you what you tell Mom, not me. And that's what

I'm going to tell her. When you're ready to tell her about Paul, I'll come stand with you."

Liz smiled, "Thanks, Mikey! Clarissa, you can put your stuff in my room unless you and Mikey are sleeping together."

"Dad would never understand," I replied.

"So you ARE!" Liz smirked.

"I sleep in Mike's bed quite a bit," Clarissa said, "but you know I have sex with girls!"

"Let's take our stuff upstairs," I interrupted, wanting to end that conversation before it got out of hand.

Clarissa and I went upstairs, dropped our bags, and then came back downstairs.

"We're going to have coffee with Tasha," I said to Liz. "We'll meet you at Hannah's."

"OK. See you at Hannah's!"

Clarissa and I left the house, got into the car, and headed for Marie's diner.

"Worried your sister was going to figure out we'd made love?" Clarissa asked.

"I was more concerned for you than for me," I said. "I don't think we want to advertise, for either of our sakes. Most people wouldn't understand."

"Jocelyn would. And believe it or not, I think Tasha would as well."

"How much did you reveal to them during Christmas break?"

"Pretty much everything, but remember, we hadn't done anything but kiss at that point. Jocelyn was sure we were going to sleep together, though. She felt it was inevitable, no matter which way things went. I am really looking forward to having her in McKinley."

"I BET you are!" I chuckled.

Clarissa laughed, "And here I thought your brain was short-circuiting over seeing me and Tasha together!"

"I'm not sure who's a bigger troublemaker, you or Lara!"

"Just wait until the FOUR of us are in McKinley in August!"

"I may ask the bishop to send me to Mount Athos!"

"Where?"

"The Holy Mountain in Greece, where there are around twenty monasteries and where women are expressly forbidden from entering under ANY circumstances! In fact, all female animals are banned except female cats and female songbirds."

Clarissa laughed, "Because bunny rabbits honor the ban?"

"I was referring to farm or domesticated animals!"

"And you going someplace with no girls? That'll be the day!"

"OK, so maybe not!"

"Who's going to be at the party tonight?"

"According to Liz about forty kids, split about evenly between guys and girls. The core group is Liz's friends you've met. The weird thing is that Maggie's house is just behind Hannah's, so she'll see everyone when we're in the backyard. But she decided to skip because she didn't want her parents to see us at the same party and have that cause trouble with her escape tomorrow morning."

"Wouldn't it have made more sense to have Liz bring her to McKinley this morning?"

"Yes, but I'm pretty sure Maggie wants the symbolism of me taking her away."

"Making the point that her dad can't control her and didn't change her mind about anything."

"Exactly," I said. "Of course, the problem is, he DID interfere, and it DID cause difficulties. Maggie just isn't aware of the extent."

"I think I'll stay at your parents' house while you make that drive and have that talk."

"It's not a done deal, Lissa."

"You just keep telling yourself that, Petrovich!"

"You do know that Lara has a lot of thinking to do over the Summer, right? And that she could decide this isn't what she wants or needs."

"Do you think that's really a risk?"

"I would never have guessed Tasha couldn't handle it," I said. "And that didn't really come out until after she and I started sleeping together. Sure, there were questions about us marrying before, but when she truly contemplated what being married to me would be like, she realized she probably couldn't handle it."

"But Lara is perfect and checks every single box!"

"I know that, but that's not enough. Tasha basically checked every box until she didn't."

"If only I could..."

"That's a bigger thing to overcome than even the one Tasha would need to overcome. And that same point has to be made about Maggie -- we never had enough time together for me to impress on her just how horrible our lives are going to be for five or six years after we graduate from Taft."

"So you could end up with one of the girls from church?"

"I'm not ruling anything out because, ultimately, I'm not in control of the situation."

"You do want it to be Lara, don't you?"

"Yes."

I pulled into the parking lot at Marie's and parked next to Tasha's Volvo. A minute later, Clarissa and I sat down in a booth with her.

"How are Sasha and Viktoriya?" I asked.

"Just fine! It's strange to have a baby in the house, but she's adorable!"

"What about the wedding?"

"Family Services filed an objection saying they felt Sasha was being coerced by my dad because of his strict religious views."

"Oh, give me a break! Even I know they can't use religion against him!"

"That's what the judge said. He rejected their report on First Amendment grounds. They have until Tuesday to submit a new report."

"Did Sasha tell them your dad was making her do it?"

Tasha shook her head, "No. She said she wanted to get married and have a father for her baby. Well, one who is her husband."

"Are you sure?" Clarissa asked.

Tasha was quiet for a moment, "I think Sasha would have preferred not to get pregnant in the first place, but after what happened, I'm sure this is what she wants. Yaroslav visits every evening after work and has dinner with us, and Sasha seems very happy to see him. I suspect she does feel somewhat pressured, but honestly, I can't imagine who wouldn't feel the pressure of being a single mom."

"I think all of us," I said thoughtfully, "at some point in our lives, encounter situations where we experience pressure, even if it's only from ourselves."

"You're talking about your ordination, right?" Tasha asked.

"Yes, but it's complicated by my other calling -- to be a doctor. If I were going to graduate and get a job a year from now, I'd be able to support a wife and family

and give them the attention they deserve. If that were the case, you and I would most likely be getting married this Summer. But it's not, so I'm in a situation where my own choices and my callings have created a situation of intense pressure.

"I know some people think the bishop and the priests are pressuring me or that my grandfather is pressuring me, but to be honest, none of them want anything more than what I want -- for me to be true to my callings, both as a doctor and as a deacon. Nobody wished for Father Deacon Grigory to have a heart attack, but that accelerated events because Saint Michael needs an active deacon. And, I'm sure an outside observer, such as Family Services, would believe I was under intense religious pressure to marry and be ordained. I am. From myself.

"I know I can say 'no' to the bishop, or rather, 'not yet', but I would prefer not to do that. Maybe I'll have to; maybe things won't work out with Lara or Maggie or Yuliana. Elizaveta would mean saying 'not yet' because I'm not sure I could date someone her age. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to try to resolve things in the next year. And again, that's me making the decision, pushing myself, not the bishop, not my grandfather, and certainly not any of the girls. Tasha, is your desire to marry because of your dad's pressure? Or because of your own desires?"

Tasha laughed softly, "You solved the 'desires' problem for me quite nicely last September!"

Clarissa and I both laughed softly in response.

"But," Tasha continued, "I know what you mean. Actually, it's the same for both -- what my dad wants is of no particular concern to me, except insofar as I have to act in such a way that he doesn't interfere with what I want to do. And I've discovered that we each have struggles about what to do in ways nobody else

might understand. May I be very «некультурный» (*nekulturny*)?"
("inappropriate")

Clarissa and I both nodded.

"My desire to go to bed with you, Mishka, was driven by pure lust. I wanted to fuck. To be blunt, I wanted to fuck you, and I wanted you to fuck me! I wanted your «половой член» (*polovoj chlen*) in my «пизда» (*pizda*) from the time I had my first period, and I was determined to make it happen. ("dick", "pussy")

"It's different for Clarissa. She wants that because she's so deeply in love with you that she can't stand it, and even though she is lesbian, she wants you in that way. But not the same way, actually. She doesn't want to fuck; she wants to make love."

"How did you know?" Clarissa asked.

"Jocelyn knows, too. We talked about it privately when she was home at Christmas. I wondered if you might, well, please forgive me for saying this, change your decision about being a lesbian. I know you and Mike don't believe it was a decision, but I can't see it as anything other than a result of sin. I'll never treat you differently, Clarissa, nor think less of you, but it's what I believe."

"A lot of people believe that," Clarissa said, "but to be equally blunt, at the age when you decided you needed Mike inside you, I was thinking about tongues and fingers from girls inside me. It was only social pressure that made me wonder. And while you're right that Mike agrees with me about it being who I am, not a decision I make, he believes it's a feature of the fallen world. I suppose you could say, splitting the difference, it's my nature, but it's part of the corruption of the true order of the universe. The thing is, Mike is fully aware of his own sins and refuses to judge others."

Tasha smiled, "And I am fully aware of certain sins Mishka commits; he commits them VERY well, too!"

Clarissa and I both laughed.

"What do you think we should do?" Clarissa asked.

Tasha smiled, "I think, from your perspective, there really is nothing you can do except make love with Mike and see what happens."

"We already did that," Clarissa replied quietly. "It was wonderful, but since then, I've been with a girl a few times."

Tasha nodded, "That is what Jocelyn thought would happen because she basically agrees with you two that being lesbian is part of your nature, not something you decided."

"When will we see you in McKinley?" Clarissa asked. "I'd like to sit down and have a long talk."

"Wednesday," Tasha said. "My parents are helping me move. Can the three of us have dinner after Vespers? I'll cook."

"Yes," Clarissa agreed.

"Sure," I said.

"And you can stay the night?"

"Natalya Vasilyevna," Clarissa interjected, smirking, "who knew?"

Tasha laughed, "And Mishka wants to watch, right?"

"I think 'participate' would be more likely!" Clarissa teased.

"I think you just put some VERY «некультурный» (*nekulturny*) pictures into Mishka's mind!"

"They were already there," Clarissa said mirthfully. "Lara has been teasing him mercilessly about me and you and Jocelyn."

"And before this gets even MORE out of hand," I said, checking my watch, "Clarissa and I need to head to the graduation party. We'll see you at church tomorrow evening and on Sunday morning, then later on Sunday afternoon."

"And then I'll see you both in McKinley on Wednesday! Mike, I know you work, but Clarissa, please come by around 10:00am. You can help me set up!"

I paid for our three coffees, Clarissa and I both hugged Tasha, and then the three of us left. Tasha got into her Volvo, and Clarissa and I got into my Mustang and I followed Tasha from the parking lot, though I turned right when she turned left.

"You were right," I said. "About Tasha understanding. And from what she said about Jocelyn, too. But do you know what I found MOST interesting?"

"Besides the fantasy of seeing me and Tasha together and having the threesome of your wildest dreams?"

I chuckled, "The fact that she didn't even blush when you said that."

"Unless I miss my guess, she's a wildcat in bed, so I'm not sure I could say anything to make her blush at this point!"

"Are you bothered by the fact that she and Jocelyn talked about you? About us?"

"They're both concerned about you, Mike. That's why they talked. I was, well, incidental to the conversation. They both know how close we are."

I nodded in acknowledgment.

"Wednesday night with Tasha will be your last, won't it?" Clarissa asked.

"It has to be. She's going to start talking with Nik, and Tasha is VERY «культурный» (*kulturny*) when it comes to such matters."

"And Jocelyn?"

"Will work itself out by the end of the Summer. I'll just have to figure out how to properly divide my time between the two of you."

"We'll figure it out. You know she and I get along really well, just as both of us do with Tasha. It's Maggie who's going to be the problem."

"Oh, I know," I replied. "I was thinking I might miss some or all of Valerie's party because I don't want to abruptly end any conversation Maggie and I might have."

"Liz can take me, if necessary."

I parked my car in front of Mindy's house because I saw so many cars further up the street. Clarissa and I got out, locked the car, then walked the short distance to Hannah's house. There was a sign taped to the front door which said to go around to the backyard, so we followed the brick walk around the house, went through the gate, and into the backyard.

"Mike! Clarissa!" Hannah exclaimed, hurrying over to us.

I hugged Hannah, and she gave me a quick peck.

"Congratulations on surviving High School!" I said.

"Thanks! My dad is cooking burgers and hot dogs, and there's tons of food on the table on the patio and more in the kitchen. Just help yourself and have fun! There's a ping-pong table in the basement, and there's room to dance down there, too. Drinks are in the cooler on the patio!"

We went over to where Liz and Emmy were standing with a couple of girls I didn't recognize.

"Mike, Clarissa, these are girls from school -- Michelle and Ellen. Girls, this is my Big Brother Mike and his best friend, Clarissa."

"Hi," I said.

"You have a girl for a best friend?" Michelle asked.

I nodded, "I do. She's in pre-med with me, and we take classes and study together."

"You're both going to be doctors?"

"Yes."

"Cool!" she gushed.

"Liz, we're going to get something to drink; we'll be right back."

Clarissa and I walked over to the cooler, and I selected two cans of RC and handed one to Clarissa.

"Your adoring public!" Clarissa said quietly.

"High School girls seem to have a thing for college guys," I said. "I sure didn't get that kind of response from girls when I was in High School!"

"Because you didn't pay attention to your little sister's friends until Emmy basically threw herself at you."

"I was pretty clueless back then."

"Back then?" Clarissa teased.

We started back to where Liz was standing, but they'd been joined by three guys. I saw Brett Ellison, Mindy's older brother, so we went to talk to him.

"Hey, Brett!" I said.

"Well, if it isn't Mike Loucks!" he said, extending his hand.

"This is my friend Clarissa. Clarissa, Brett Ellison, Mindy's brother, and former member of the Harding High Chess team."

They said 'Hi' to each other.

"Do you still play?" Brett asked.

"Occasionally," I said. "I just don't have the time. You?"

"I'm on the school team. Did you hear about my roommate?"

"Mindy told us," I replied. "Hauled away by the cops. My ex-roommate got the same treatment, but his was rape, not exposing himself to little kids!"

"Supposedly, Jeff, my ex-roommate, copped a plea and is doing time in the county jail in Clermont County. I thought he was a strange dude, and I guess I was right. How is school going?"

"Good. We're about to take the MCAT -- the medical school exam. And we're working on our applications. You?"

"I'll graduate with my degree in accounting and look for a job. I'll work on my MBA in night school. And start looking for Mrs. Ellison!"

"If you survey this backyard, I think you'll find a bevy of cute girls who might take you up on that search!"

He laughed, "My little sister did have some cute friends! How's your sister?"

"Good. She's moving in with Emmy Nelson, and she'll be going to Rutherford Junior College in the Fall."

"And my sister will be in McKinley with you. She seems to have a thing for you."

"I have a girl I'm seeing pretty steady," I said. "Not 'going steady' but working on it. You?"

"There are a couple of girls I go out with, but nothing too serious. Are Dale and Jocelyn around?"

"Dale's working in Seattle for the Summer; he has an Internship with Boeing. Jocelyn won't be home until Sunday afternoon. She's transferring to Taft to finish her undergrad degree."

"She's recovered from her wreck, right?"

"Yes. She has some minor aches and pains and stiffness and the slightest limp but given the alternative..."

"Yeah. A kid I knew pretty well at Bowling Green was run over by a drunk driver. He's paralyzed from the waist down now."

"That sucks."

"It does. Still involved in church?"

"I am. I was ordained a subdeacon last year, and I'll probably be ordained a deacon next year."

"No surprise there! Still taking karate?"

"I'm a brown belt now. Are you still flying model planes?"

"Yes, though it's a bit tougher to find the open space at school. Here, I can go almost anywhere."

"BURGERS ARE UP!" Hannah's dad called out.

"That's my 'bat signal'!" Brett declared.

I laughed, and Clarissa and I followed him to get in line for food. Liz and her friends, now including Mindy, Violet, Valerie, and Larisa, got in line behind us.

We got our food, and Brett struck up a conversation with a cute brunette I'd never seen before, so Clarissa and I went to sit at a picnic table. Liz and her friends joined us, and we sat close together to make room for everyone, with Clarissa on my right and Emmy on my left, much to Mindy's chagrin.

When we finished eating, Emmy asked if I'd dance with her. I agreed, so we went to the basement and saw a few other kids dancing in a softly lit, open area at the end of the basement. A song was just ending, and we waited a few seconds for the next one to start. Emmy smiled broadly when *All Out of Love* by Air Supply began playing. I took her in my arms and held her close.

"This is one of those songs that makes me wonder what might have been," she said quietly.

"You mean if all the stuff with Liz and later with your dad hadn't happened?"

"Yes. And then the stupid way I behaved with Clark. That was all about getting back at my dad."

"We've all made mistakes," I said gently. "It's a matter of learning from them and moving on. You're doing that. You're all set for the Fall for the criminal justice program, right?"

"Yes. In two years, I'll be ready for handcuffs and a nightstick! You could help me test them out!"

I chuckled, "I think in two years, there's a good chance I'll be married, and I can't see my future wife, whoever it is, allowing me to play with you!"

Emmy laughed, "'Can Mike come out to play?' won't work, will it?"

"It's highly unlikely!"

As we turned a bit, I saw Mindy come into the basement, and it was obvious she was going to want to dance, something I was loath to do. I didn't want to encourage her in any way, but I also didn't want to make a scene. The song ended, but I didn't release my hold on Emmy. The next song was *Stay the Night* from *Chicago 17*, a new album which I had on my list to buy when I arrived back in McKinley.

"You do NOT want to dance with Mindy to this song!" Emmy teased knowingly.

"No, I don't. I really don't want to dance with her at all. I don't want to encourage her."

"I have an idea, but I don't want you to get the wrong impression."

"What?"

"Neck with me and run your hands over my butt while we dance. When the song finishes, I'll take your hand and lead you upstairs where we can get drinks, and I'll sit on your lap."

I chuckled, "Which isn't exactly torture for either of us!"

"You know I'd do it with you if you wanted, and I know you liked me, but I also know you have Maggie, so I won't be a bitch."

I slid my hands down over Emmy's cute butt, and she hugged me tightly, pressing her firm breasts into my chest and running her hands over my back. I lowered my head, and we exchanged a soft French kiss as Chicago urged us to 'stay the night'. Each time they sang 'I want to make it with you', Emmy ground against me, causing what I was sure was her desired reaction. She DID want to go to bed with me, but I was also sure she wouldn't press the issue beyond the

play-acting we were doing. Well, play-acting AND expressing desire on her part. Not that I didn't have the same desire, but it would be a supremely bad idea to act on it.

The song finished, and as Emmy had suggested, she took my hand and led me from the basement, past a glowering Mindy, and up the stairs. We got cans of RC from the cooler and then found a chair in the living room where I sat down, and she curled up in my lap.

"Interesting development," Clarissa teased, coming up next to us.

"I'm simply defending Mike from Mindy!" Emmy exclaimed with a smirk.

"She's on the prowl again?" Clarissa asked.

"More like 'still'," Emmy replied. "She has it in her head that Mike will be available for some fun in McKinley."

"She's SADLY mistaken," Clarissa said. "Why not just tell her 'no'?"

"I didn't want to make a scene, and if there's a safer girl at this party than Emmy, I'm not sure who it would be!"

"Hey!" Emmy protested, smacking my shoulder lightly.

"I meant in terms of not taking things the wrong way!"

"I'll take it ANY way!" she teased, then said, "Sorry."

"It's OK," I replied. "I know you're teasing, even though the offer is real."

"Maggie should have come to the party," Emmy said. "That would make it so much easier."

Or that much more difficult, I thought, because I wouldn't be able to talk to her the way I needed to.

"Are you going to monopolize him all night?" Hannah asked.

"Mindy," Emmy replied flatly.

"Still?" Hannah asked, rolling her eyes. "She knows Maggie is going to be in McKinley starting tomorrow. You'd think she'd have a clue!"

"And would you like Mike to take you up to your room and screw you silly?" Emmy teased.

Hannah laughed, "Duh! But I also understand that being a stalker is NOT the way to make that happen. He treats Mindy like she has the plague! He treats us really nicely! And under the right circumstances, he WOULD take me to my room and screw me silly!"

"And your dad would be grilling ME instead of burgers and dogs!" I said with a grin.

"It's possible he might object," Hannah allowed with a smirk.

I saw Mindy come up the steps and glare at Emmy and me, then go out to the backyard.

"Boy, is she pissed!" Hannah said. "Is it safe to ask for a dance?"

"I think so," Emmy said. "But I'll come downstairs just in case."

We got up, went downstairs, and Emmy held my can of RC while Hannah and I slow danced to *The Sounds of Silence* by Simon & Garfunkel. Hannah danced just as closely as Emmy had, and my mind immediately flashed to our very enjoyable time in bed.

"Remembering moving like this horizontally?" Hannah asked as she rubbed against my quickly hardening shaft.

"It was very enjoyable," I replied.

"That's what you said when you left that day! But I think Emmy told you we all understand about you and Maggie, so unless my dad were to suddenly lose his mind and let me take you to bed tonight, I'll have to settle for the dance!"

The song finished, and before we could leave the dance floor, Valerie asked if she could have the next dance, which led to a series of dances with Liz's friends and Clarissa, including the girls I'd just met, Michelle and Ellen. All of them had danced fairly close, but not as close as Emmy or Hannah, and I'd very much enjoyed the varied female flesh in my arms. I was sure that the other guys they were dancing with appreciated it just as much, and I saw quite a few smiles on newly graduated High School guys.

The one thing which surprised me was that Violet hadn't asked me to dance, and I wondered if she was still struggling with her feelings. We hadn't spoken since that day at my house when we'd played pool and kissed, and I had no idea what she might be thinking or feeling. My thoughts were interrupted by Hannah's mom telling us that it was time for cake and ice cream, so I released Michelle from my arms, and we joined everyone else outside in the backyard.

Hannah's mom and dad served graduation cake and ice cream to everyone, and we all stood in the backyard to eat. I looked over at Maggie's house. The lights

were on, but all the drapes or blinds were closed, and thoughts of what I'd say in the morning ran through my head as I got a serious sugar high from the heavily frosted cake and the ice cream.

Clarissa and I went to toss our plates and plastic forks into the trash, then got cups of ice water, as we'd already had enough sugar to double our risk of diabetes. I saw Violet walk towards us. Clarissa winked and walked away.

"Hi," Violet said quietly.

"Hi! Enjoying the party?"

"Yes, but I'll enjoy mine in two years even more!"

"I'm sure! I missed dancing with you, and if you want to, I'd like to."

Violet smiled and nodded, so I took her hand and led her to the basement. We were the only ones there, and no music was playing, so I put a cassette labeled 'Slow Mix/Late -- Ken' into the tapedeck and pressed 'Play'. Once the tape was rolling, I went over to Violet and waited for the first notes, which turned out to be *In the Air Tonight* by Phil Collins from his album *Face Value*.

I wasn't quite sure what Violet would want, so I held my arms out. She stepped close but didn't press her body against mine. I put my hands on her hips, and she put hers on my shoulders. As we danced slowly, she moved just close enough for her breasts to rub against my chest, which, in some ways, was more exciting than if she'd had her body pressed firmly against mine.

The light contact and gentle rubbing made me think about my fantasy, which was only reinforced by the refrain of the song, which seemed almost prescient -- 'Well, I've been waiting for this moment for all my life, oh Lord'. We continued dancing that way, and when the next song began, I realized that whoever 'Ken'

was, he had an agenda because the next song was *Tonight's the Night (Gonna Be Alright)* by Rod Stewart, which was perhaps the most suggestive song I knew that could be played on the radio, and I suspected 'Ken' used this tape to try to get laid!

"Mike," Violet whispered just as Rod Stewart sang about the 'secret about to unfold'.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember what you told me? Back in April?"

I nodded, "I do."

She moved closer, pressed her body firmly against mine, and put her lips near my ear, "Will you fuck my brains out? Please?"

I wasn't prepared and had no rubbers with me, and there was no way I could take her to Hannah's room or any other room in the house.

"I don't have protection with me," I said gently. "And where would we go?"

"I live three doors down, and nobody is home. And I, uhm, started taking the Pill in February because I thought I wanted to do it then. Will you fuck my brains out? Please? Tomorrow, you'll be with Maggie, so it needs to be tonight!"

Every single one of Maggie's friends was driving home the point that Saturday morning was going to be very difficult. And I wondered if being with Violet was a good idea because of that. The thing was, I'd been very clear with Violet that if she asked me, I would, and while I knew it was entirely within my rights to say 'no', it might totally crush her. And, pig that I could be, one last fling with a sexy girl was nearly impossible to resist. No, not just 'nearly', but 'impossible'.

"If you're sure," I replied.

She stepped back, took my hand, and we headed to the steps just as *Do That To Me One More Time* began playing. The steps took us to the foyer of the house and let us slip out the front door without running into anyone. I wasn't concerned about being seen for me, but I wasn't sure how Violet would feel, and I certainly didn't want to chance any kind of interaction with Mindy.

We walked down the sidewalk, in the opposite direction from Mindy's house, to a two-story house which looked almost identical to Hannah's, though it was painted beige and had yellow shutters instead of being white with green shutters. She led me up the walk, unlocked the front door, and let us into the darkened house. She shut the door, then wordlessly led me up a flight of stairs, lit only by a dim nightlight, down a similarly lit hall, and into her room. She shut the door, turned the lock, and then moved across the dark room to turn on a radio. Next, she pulled down the blinds and closed the curtains, then moved to the nightstand next to her bed and turned on a small lamp, which provided just enough light to see.

She pulled down the bedspread, blanket, and sheet, then moved back around the bed and came to stand in front of me, arms at her sides, clearly waiting for me to make the first move. I smiled, took a half step, and moved my lips to hers to kiss her. The moment our lips touched, Violet practically threw herself at me. Her lips parted, our tongues met, and she hugged me tightly, mashing her body against mine, every bit of nervousness having seemingly vanished in an instant.

There was an urgency to Violet's kisses, and her hands pawed at my clothes. Taking the hint, I tugged her T-shirt from her jeans, and we took turns removing each other's shirts. Less than two minutes later, the rest of our clothing was in a jumbled pile on the floor, and her firm, full breasts, and my rock-hard erection were mashed between us as we kissed furiously.

As we kissed, Violet shifted slightly and flexed her hips, pressing her mons against my shaft, grinding against me, and groaning softly into my mouth. I moved her backwards a bit, and when her legs touched the bed, she broke the kiss and sat down. I dropped to my knees and immediately latched on to a large, erect nipple, sucking and licking greedily for a minute, then switching to Violet's other breast before kissing my way down to my true destination as Violet lay back in anticipation.

"Ungh!" Violet groaned as I ran my tongue over her labia.

She tasted heavenly -- a mix of copper, spice, and musk. I was always amazed at just how different each girl tasted and that I hadn't found one I didn't like. I pressed my tongue between Violet's engorged labia and lapped up her wonderful juices, in the process, causing even more to flow. Within a minute, she was extremely wet, and my face was covered with her juices. When I latched onto her clit and sucked, she gasped, then groaned loudly, and her entire body shook.

"Oh my God!" she gasped when her orgasm had passed.

Determined to make it as pleasurable as possible for her, I slipped my arms under her legs, resting them on my shoulders and sliding my hands up to cup her full breasts while I kissed, licked, and sucked her labia and clitoris and explored her tight tunnel with my tongue. Her second orgasm was better than the first, causing her to cry out in ecstasy, and the third one was even better than the second.

"Mike!" she exclaimed, gasping.

I raised my head and saw burning desire in her eyes. I slid from under her legs, stood, and helped her move so her head was on her pillows. I got into bed and

moved on top of Violet, who spread her legs wide. I shifted so that my glans was against her sopping-wet labia, looked deeply into her eyes, and waited.

"Fuck me, Mike," she whispered insistently. "Fuck my brains out!"

I lowered my lips to hers, and as I pressed my tongue into her mouth, I pushed my glans past her labia, entering her hot, silky, slick tunnel, encountering just the briefest resistance. With one firm thrust, I was fully embedded in her tight confines. Violet wrapped her arms and legs around me and began bucking her hips. I took my cue and pulled back, pushing forward firmly. Violet met my thrust, and after one more withdrawal and thrust, we were off to the races.

Violet broke our kiss, gasped for breath, and begged me to fuck her, which I obliged, thrusting into her with the same force with which she bucked her hips. She begged me once again to fuck her, so I put my head next to hers, my arms around her shoulders, and pounded her as hard and fast as I could, with her matching every thrust. As her orgasm approached, Violet became frenzied, bucking, wriggling, and grinding. She moved her legs from across my thighs to around my butt, squeezed them tightly, and SCREAMED as a tremendous orgasm overtook her.

The strong spasms of her internal muscles nearly put me over the top, but I managed to hold back. Her orgasm passed, and we instantly began working her towards another one, which I knew would take me past the point of no return. As we moved closer and closer, Violet's breathing became ragged, but that didn't prevent her from gasping for me to fuck her as we both reached the pinnacle. I blasted jet after jet of cum into her spasming tunnel, and she ground against me, doing her best to prolong her orgasm. When mine had passed, I resumed thrusting until Violet relaxed under me, and I lifted my head and looked into her eyes.

She smiled and ran her hand over my back, and I kissed her softly.

"Do you think we have time to do it again?" she asked.

I smiled because, for another round with Violet, I'd make time!

II. "Well, THAT was fun!"

May 25, 1984, West Monroe, Ohio

After our second round, Violet and I went to her bathroom to shower together. We needed to get back to the party, so we didn't take too long. Once we were clean and dry, we dressed, and I helped her change the sheets on her bed. She put them in the washing machine and checked the time so she could return to put them in the dryer. Once she was satisfied there was no remaining evidence, we left the house to walk back to the party.

"Thank you for fucking my brains out," she said impishly as we turned up the walk to Hannah's house.

"I should thank you!" I replied.

She laughed, grabbed my arm, and gave me a quick peck on the lips before we went into the house. We walked through to the backyard, and each got a pop from the cooler. Violet winked and walked over to where Liz and her friends were, and Clarissa came to stand next to me.

"Last fling?" she asked quietly.

"I expect so," I replied.

"She looks VERY happy!" Clarissa said, looking towards where the girls were standing.

"Well, there IS a pool table in their basement," I said smugly.

Clarissa laughed softly and shook her head, "Seriously?"

"Well, I know they have a pool table, but no, we were in her bed. And I'm certainly satisfied!"

"Of course you are! And you left me all alone with a bunch of High Schoolers!"

"Sorry," I chuckled. "No cute girls here you're interested in?"

"Compared to Rebekah? No chance!"

"I'll take your word for it!"

"You should! But I guess it's winding down -- Tasha Wednesday, me Thursday, and then, however you end it with Jocelyn. You're going to be chaste over the Summer?"

"I think so, yes. Jos will have a say in the matter, but I'm pretty sure she'll agree with my approach."

"A kind of Lenten purge before Lara returns?"

"That was my thinking. No complications and nothing to interfere."

"Maggie?"

"Not sex, that's for sure. That has a very specific meaning for Maggie -- it's a promise to work towards marriage. It's not a commitment to marry the way it would have been for April, but it's also not something she's going to do without at least a very good chance, and I'm not going to mislead her or try to manipulate her."

"You're walking a tightrope trying to not give her false hope, but also not to write her off."

"I know. But we should have already been at that point. Her dad messed it up and that's created the perfect storm of tomorrow morning. And given that, I think we should probably thank Hannah and her parents and head home."

"I thought you might stay later to avoid talking to your mom."

"She'll be up early tomorrow for sure, and I'll have a tough time avoiding her, given I need to have breakfast. But in the end, I have nothing to say to her about Liz, so the more I think about it, avoiding her isn't necessary. Let's go."

We went to find Hannah's parents and thanked them, then found Hannah, congratulated her once again, thanked her for inviting us, then exchanged a quick hug.

"I loved being with you, Mike," she whispered as we hugged. "Make it even better for Maggie!"

I nodded, as I couldn't really say anything. Clarissa and I left through the gate to walk to my car, which was parked in front of Mindy's house. As we got to the car, I realized that I was lucky Mindy hadn't egged or keyed my car, or worse, given how upset she'd seemed.

When we arrived at my parents' house, I backed into the driveway as I usually did, we got out, locked the car, and went into the house. I wasn't surprised to see my mom sitting on the couch with her *Reader's Digest* magazine. Clarissa squeezed my arm and headed upstairs while I went to the kitchen, got a glass of water, and then went back to the living room and sat down.

"What's going on with Liz?" Mom asked without any preliminaries.

"You'll have to ask her," I replied. "I know she's moving in with Emmy, has a hostess job at a diner in Rutherford, and is enrolled in Rutherford Junior College."

"There's more to this, Mike, and I think you know what it is."

I took a deep breath and let it out, "And I think you have to ask Liz. She's an adult, and that means she gets to make her own decisions."

"What decisions?"

"All of them! Just as I do. She's enrolled in school, which is what you wanted, and I hope you intend to contribute to her tuition the way you have for me."

"We do, but Mike, given everything that's happened, do you really think she's ready for this?"

"Given that I wasn't, I'm not sure what you're asking."

"What do you mean? You were more than ready to go to college!"

"I meant to be an adult," I replied. "I believe my first few decisions as an adult raised serious questions in your mind about my ability to act and think like an adult. And I've made mistakes since then. If you wanted me to be ready to be an adult in the sense of not making any big mistakes, I'm not sure when I could ever have left home. I'll point out she's doing the same thing I did, with the exception of living in the dorms."

"Mike, you didn't go through the trauma she went through."

"No, I didn't. But how long are you going to define her solely by the fact that she was raped?"

"WHAT?!" Mom gasped.

"Pick one -- the Kramer brothers or Paul, at least in your mind. That's how she's been defined in this house for the last two years. You not so much as Dad, but you, too."

"That's a bold accusation and pretty harsh, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure what you want me to say, Mom. Liz is an adult and needs the same room to grow that I've had. I guarantee you I didn't conform to your ideas of how I should have conducted my life the past three years, but you've mostly treated me as an adult, even when I've messed up in a big way. I don't think you've done that for Liz."

"Assuming for a moment that all of that is true, and I'm not agreeing it is, but assuming it is, there's something you know which you aren't telling me."

"Whether there is or not, and I'm not saying either way, you HAVE to talk to Liz about your concerns, not me. I need her to trust that if, and I mean 'if', she comes to me for advice, she can count on me to give it without, in effect, tattling to you and Dad."

"And what is it you think might be tattling?"

I shook my head, "We're no longer at that point, Mom. I'm still your son, and I always will be, and you're my mom, and you always will be, but we're both adults now. I'm not yours to command, and I'm not using that word in a way that signifies I think you were overbearing. What I'm saying is, you can ask, and I get to decide what to say; you don't get to tell me to answer, which, I'll point out,

I did in the past. Before Liz turned eighteen, there was a grey area, and after the initial problems, I shaded towards your version of grey, not mine."

"Are you aware that Paul Reynolds is out of prison?"

I nodded, "I knew that was supposed to happen at some point this year based on his sentence."

"Is this about him?"

"Mom, I can't answer 'yes' or 'no' without giving in to playing *Twenty Questions*, which I simply won't do. Ask Liz. If she won't tell you, then I CAN'T tell you, assuming I even know what it is that you want to know. What I do know is that I love Liz, and if she asks for my advice or my help, I'm going to give it to the best of my ability. And not to be impudent, but now that Liz is eighteen, I don't have to clear that advice or help with you."

"I have a very bad feeling about all of this."

"Just trust her, please. And give her some space to become the person she wants to be. There's something important you haven't considered, and that's the fact that Liz talks to Clarissa, Tasha, and Jocelyn. And she asks them for advice, and they don't reveal any confidence. And you like and trust all three of them. Let Liz be an adult, please. Just be there for her. That's what I'm doing."

"Which doesn't change my belief that something is very, very wrong."

"Let me say this, and it's all I'm going to say -- I'm not aware of Liz doing anything, or planning to do anything, that's illegal or dangerous. Personally, I'm FAR more worried about the idea of Emmy Nelson with handcuffs and a nightstick than anything Liz might, or might not, be doing!"

Mom laughed and shook her head, "And I know EXACTLY which image you have in your head, Subdeacon Pig!"

"I'll likely be married by the time she joins the Sheriff's Department," I grinned. "So those thoughts will just stay safely tucked away in my brain."

"Are we going to get to meet this girl who your friends and sister have met?"

"She's back home near Pittsburgh, and she and her family are going on a cruise starting in a few days. When she comes back to McKinley, IF things go that direction, then yes, you'll get to meet her."

"Mike, are you SURE that Liz isn't in any danger?"

"As sure as I can be," I replied. "I do need to get to bed. I have to be up early."

"Good night, then."

"Good night, Mom."



May 26, 1984, West Monroe and McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, Clarissa, Liz, and I ate breakfast together, then sat on the patio to drink tea until it was time for me to leave to get Maggie. I'd considered saying something to Liz about my talk with my mom, but I decided that, in the end, there wasn't a reason to belabor the point either way. So long as my mom left it alone, I could leave it alone. Clarissa walked me out to my car.

"See you around noon, right?"

"Assuming all goes well, Yes. Do me a favor?"

"Sure. What?"

"Take Liz somewhere just to avoid ANY possibility of my mom trying to confront either of you."

"Already planned! We're going to go see Viktoriya."

Clarissa and I hugged, I got into my car, and waved to her after I pulled out of the driveway and turned in the direction of Maggie's house. To get there, I drove past Mindy's, Hannah's, and Violet's houses, turned two corners, and pulled up in front of the house. I elected to back in, even though this was a subdivision and not an occasionally busy road such as the one which passed in front of my parents' house. I unlocked the passenger door, got out of the car, and went up to the front door, where I rang the bell.

"Hi, Mike!" Maggie said, opening the door. "Come in."

I stepped into the house and followed her upstairs to her room.

"Get that box, please," she said, pointing to a cardboard box with photo albums, what looked like a diary, and a bunch of other small items. She picked up two large bags, which I was sure held her clothes, and started for the door.

"Margaret?!" I heard a woman's voice call out.

"Ignore her!" Maggie said. "Let's go!"

I followed her down the stairs where a woman, who I was sure was Maggie's mom, was standing, hands on hips.

"Who is that, and where do you think you're going, young lady?"

"This is Mike. And I'm moving out."

"You're doing no such thing!"

"I'm eighteen," Maggie said, dropping one bag and pulling the door open. "Mike, go!"

I walked out the door and made my way to my car. I got the box placed in the back of the Mustang and turned to wait. Loud voices reached me from inside the house, and I saw Maggie push past her mom, who was trying to block the door. She walked quickly to me, I got her bags into the back seat, and we got into the car. I started the engine and pulled out of the driveway, fastening my seat belt as I did so.

"She's pissed," Maggie said.

"Obviously."

"Thanks for coming to get me!"

"You're welcome. Where are we going?"

"Fourth and Oak in McKinley," she said.

That was just over a mile from Doctor Blahnik's house. I headed for Route 50 and turned east, accelerating to the speed limit.

"How have you been?" I asked.

"OK, I guess. It sucked these last few months because I couldn't see you or talk to you, and I've missed you. How are things at school?"

"Straight A's, and mostly calm. There was some idiocy with the administration about not treating us like adults, but we worked that out. Otherwise, Clarissa and I are still best friends. Jocelyn will start Summer school in a week, and Tasha will start her new job in a week as well. She's moving on Wednesday."

"Have you been dating?"

I nodded, "Yes. Kimiko and I were seeing each other, but she intends to go back to Japan. I saw Katy Malenkov, but she's going to stay in California and work on her Master's degree when she finishes her undergrad degree and then work out there. About two months ago, I met a girl named Laura, and we've been seeing each other."

"Seeing each other?" Maggie said warily. "As in steady?"

"No, but it wasn't just casually dating, either."

She slumped back in her seat and sighed, "Tell me."

"I just did," I said gently. "I'm not hiding anything. Yes, I like her. Yes, she likes me. Yes, she's Orthodox. She's also gone for the Summer, and we agreed we'd talk in August about the future."

"That sounds serious," Maggie said quietly.

"To be totally honest, it could be. But it's also true that you and I have time to get to know each other."

"But she might be the one you choose."

"There was always that possibility," I said, keeping my voice as gentle as possible. "But I've kept my word to you -- I am not steady with anyone, and I haven't made any commitments to anyone. But, again, being completely honest, it's true that I will take her into consideration in deciding about you and me."

"I guess I never had a clear playing field."

"You knew I was dating; I never kept that from you."

"True."

"There's also a complication that I'm not sure anyone shared with you."

"What's that?" she asked dully.

"Deacon Grigory from Saint Michael the Archangel had a serious heart attack and will likely never be able to serve as a deacon again. The bishop wants to ordain me not long after I graduate."

"But you have to marry before then or never marry, right?"

"Correct."

"Which means you have to decide pretty soon, right?"

"I decided to get married," I grinned.

Maggie actually laughed, which I felt was a good thing.

"I didn't think you would want to be a monk, not after the report I got from Hannah!"

"No, I'm not cut out to be chaste, and yes, it means I'll probably marry just over a year from now. I could tell the bishop 'not now' if I don't have a viable prospect for a wife."

"Would it be wrong to say that I'd accept a proposal today?"

"Yes, but mostly because we don't know each other well enough. Remember what I committed to -- us getting to know each other better and seeing what happens."

"Which would have already happened if my dad hadn't interfered! He totally violated my privacy, snooping in my room!"

"All we can do at this point is move forward," I said. "Are you still planning to come back with me to Valerie's party?"

"That is the plan. I'll stay with Valerie tonight."

"That's what Liz suggested would be the case. Clarissa and I need to leave early from my grandparents' house to go to Tasha's for a small reception. Oh, did anyone tell you that Sasha had her baby?"

"Yes. Emmy told me, but I had guessed when she didn't show up for school a couple of days in a row."

"Tomorrow, Liz will bring you to my house, and Clarissa and I will get you from there."

We were perhaps twenty minutes from Maggie's house and almost out of Harding County when I saw the red and blue strobe lights of a Sheriff's Department cruiser coming up fast behind me in my rearview mirror. The road

was clear, so I moved slightly to the right to let the cruiser pass, but instead, it slowed in pace with me.

"PULL OVER, PLEASE!" came over the loudspeaker.

"I think your mom called the Sheriff," I said as I slowed and looked for a safe spot where two cars could park. I rounded a bend and saw a farm road, so I turned into it and stopped. The Sheriff's cruiser pulled in behind me.

"Hands on the dash," I said to Maggie.

I unbuckled my seat belt and rolled down the window, then put my hands on top of the steering wheel. I watched in the sideview mirror as the Deputy, who I didn't recognize, got out of his car, unsnapped the strap on his holster, and carefully made his way to stand just behind the driver's window.

"Driver, I need you to step out of the car slowly," he said. "Keep your hands where I can see them. Miss, please don't move."

I very carefully opened the door and pushed it open. I got out of the car, holding my hands up.

"Hands on the front fender, please, feet back and spread apart."

I did as he said and asked, "What's the problem, Deputy?"

"We had a report that the young lady was kidnapped."

"I'm eighteen!" Maggie protested. "I'm here because I want to be!"

"Just a moment, Miss. Sir, do you have ID?"

"Yes. My wallet is in my back pocket."

"Take it out slowly and set it on the hood."

I did as he instructed, opening it so my school ID and driver's license were visible.

"I need to frisk you, and then I'm going to put you in my cruiser. If you cooperate, I won't handcuff you. You are NOT under arrest at the moment."

"I'll cooperate," I said.

"Anything in your pockets? Any weapons on your person or in the car?"

I was suddenly glad that I wasn't in the habit of carrying a pocketknife as most guys in Harding County did.

"No. No weapons and nothing in my pockets."

He frisked me, then stepped back.

"Hands on your head, then stand up and move past the back door of the cruiser."

I did as he said, and he followed close behind, and although I couldn't see it, I was sure he had his hand on the butt of his service revolver. When I was past the door, he opened it, I got in, and he shut the door. I put my hands in my lap and waited, looking through the heavy wire screen that separated the back seat from the front, and watched as the Deputy picked up my wallet and looked at the ID. He spoke into his radio and, after a moment, went around to the passenger side of my Mustang.

I couldn't hear what was said, but Maggie got out, and took her billfold from her small shoulder bag and showed her ID. She was eighteen, so I knew there was nothing that could be done if she said she was safe, but that didn't mean we would avoid going back to the Sheriff's Department offices near Rutherford. It took about ten minutes before the Deputy came back and opened the door.

"Sorry for the misunderstanding, Mr. Loucks," he said. "You're free to go."

"Thanks, Deputy," I said.

I got out, walked to my car, retrieved my wallet from the hood, then got into the car next to a visibly shaking Maggie.

"Just take some deep breaths and relax," I counseled. "Don't talk yet."

I closed my door, buckled my seat belt, and started the car. Once the cruiser was out of the way, I maneuvered my car so I could pull out onto Route 50, and when there was a long break in the traffic, I did so, shifting through the gears and accelerating to the speed limit quickly. When we were about a mile east of where we'd been stopped, I spoke.

"Well, THAT was fun!" I grouched. "What did he say?"

"That my mom called to say I was being kidnapped. Once he saw my ID and saw I was eighteen, I told him I was with you because I was moving out of the house. He asked a few questions, and as soon as they told him over his radio that there were no warrants for you or your car, he let us go."

"And right now, a pair of F-15s are being scrambled at Wright-Patterson to find us and take us out," I said flatly.

"My dad can't do that!" Maggie protested but then asked nervously, "Can he?"

"No," I chuckled. "But I'm sure he'll think it! They have no idea where we're going, do they?"

"No. How did the Sheriff's Deputy find us?"

"I'd guess your mom got my plates, and my car is registered at Doctor Blahnik's house in McKinley. Then, it was just a matter of calling whichever cruiser was closest. A few minutes and we'd have been in Hayes County."

"I can't believe my mom called the cops!"

"Oh, I can," I sighed. "I should have guessed something like that would happen. And I fully expect a visit from your dad at some point, though I guess he'll show up at Doctor Blahnik's house."

"Why?"

"I'm sure he has a friend in the Sheriff's department or the BMV who will give him the address from my license or registration. I'll need to warn Doctor Blahnik. Does anyone know the name of the lawyer or your new address?"

"Only you and Karl, and Karl is up near Chicago."

"You didn't leave a note or anything?"

"No. Why would I?"

"Just asking," I replied.

"Sorry I caused you trouble," she said quietly.

"Everything is fine," I said. "Ten minutes in the back of a Sheriff's cruiser isn't a big deal. He didn't arrest me."

"Why did he do that?"

"I'm guessing they knew you were eighteen but still had to check our story."

"What if I had been seventeen?"

"I don't even want to think about that!" I replied. "You're an adult now, and that's what matters. I meant to ask, how much money do you have?"

"My savings, which is just over \$200. Why?"

"Just making sure you had money until you get your first paycheck."

"Karl paid my rent for the first month, and other than that, all I need is my food. I'm fine. How often can I see you?"

"I'll need some time with my other friends, but I'm sure we can see each other at least a couple of times a week, not counting church, though you know at church I have to be in the altar. Oh, and if you reach behind my seat, there's a bag with a prayer book, a prayer rope, and a copy of *The Orthodox Church* to replace the stuff your dad burned."

"Will you pick me up for church?"

"Yes. But remember, I need to be there early, and Clarissa usually comes along. Tasha will probably drive herself because she has a car, but we haven't discussed that."

"What about her?"

"In the next couple of weeks, she'll have her hooks into Nikolas Dmitriyevich at Saint Michael. I'd lay odds on them being married inside of the next eighteen months."

"Is there something in the water at your church in Rutherford?" Maggie asked lightly.

"The more traditional kids, me included, believe in early marriage. My problem was medical school and Residency."

"Uhm, not to pry, but this other girl, is she a student?"

"Yes. She just finished her Freshman year."

Maggie was quiet for a moment, then asked, "How do I win?"

"By being you," I said. "There's a lot to talk about, including what life would be like and when we could have a family and a host of other things. Remember, Tasha dropped out after truly considering the situation."

"Is it really that bad?"

"We'll discuss it over the Summer and get to know each other, and then we'll both have decisions to make. Which was the original plan, if you remember."

"You know what I want, right?"

I nodded, "Yes, I do. But Tasha wanted the same thing. And so did Katy Malenkov, but Katy's in California, and I told you what Tasha will be doing."

"OK," she said tentatively.

I navigated the streets of McKinley, and when we got to Fourth and Oak, Maggie scanned the addresses on the mailboxes and pointed out the correct house. I pulled into the driveway, parked, and we got out of the car. Maggie grabbed her two bags, and I picked up the box. We walked up to the front door, and Maggie rang the bell. A few seconds later, a pretty brunette woman about my age opened the door.

"You must be Maggie," she said. "I'm Mary Elbert. Who's your friend?"

"This is Mike. He's helping me move."

"Nice to meet you both! Come in, and I'll show you your room."

She led us into the house, then down a hall into a spacious room with its own private bath. Maggie put her bags on the bed and had me set the box on the table. Mrs. Elbert gave Maggie a key, told her a few house rules which weren't at all onerous, and then left us alone.

"How far is the law office from the house?" I asked.

"About six blocks, so it's an easy walk."

"Cool. Do you want to unpack?" I asked.

"Do you mind?"

"No. We have over three hours until the party starts, and it's only about fifty-five minutes to Valerie's house."

I sat down in an easy chair in the corner and watched while Maggie unpacked and put away her clothes, then removed the items from the box and either put

them in the desk or on a shelf above it. Twenty minutes later, we left the house, got into my car, and started on our way back to West Monroe for Valerie's party.

Most of the people at Valerie's party had been at Hannah's party, and I ended up dancing with many of the same girls, as well as Maggie, who was instrumental in keeping a very pissed-off Mindy at bay. Clarissa and I left the party early so that we could attend Vespers, and following Vespers, we headed back to my parents' house.



May 27, 1984, West Monroe and McKinley, Ohio

After church on Sunday morning and a few hours at Liz's party at my grandparents' house, Clarissa and I went to the reception at Tasha's house, where I got to see Viktoriya for the first time. Both Viktoriya and Sasha looked healthy and happy, and Yaroslav played the part of the doting husband and father, albeit minus the necessary ceremony, which I was sure Deacon Vasily required before Yaroslav could ACT as a husband. Both he and Deacon Vasily seemed convinced that the hearing would go well, and assuming it did, the tentative date for the wedding was June 16th at Holy Transfiguration.

We spent a few hours with Tasha, her closest friends, and her relatives and then headed back to my parents' house so we could get our things as well as meet up with Maggie for the drive back to McKinley.

"Anything I should avoid saying?" Clarissa asked.

"I've limited what I've said about Lara, revealing only that she just finished her Freshman year, is Orthodox, and is from the Pittsburgh area."

"Maggie seems to be handling things OK."

"I emphasized that I've kept my word, that I've made no permanent commitments, and that she knew I was dating."

Clarissa laughed, "She knew you were fucking her friends, too!"

"Actually, she knew I was with Hannah because Hannah apparently told her, but I don't think Violet will say anything. And nobody else but you knows anything happened."

"It will be very interesting to see what approach Maggie takes. Is she nonchalant, confident, and self-assured? Is she needy and clingy and worried? Aggressive or passive? Does she consider using her body? Or are the green eyes and red hair enough?"

I chuckled, "I do have a serious weakness for green eyes and red hair."

"Angie?"

"Yes."

"Not to mention a serious weakness for one smoking-hot blonde!"

"She's all yours, Lissa!" I teased.

"Of all the girls, she's the LEAST likely to even experiment!"

"But you would, wouldn't you?"

"I am attracted to her! And don't be totally grossed out, but I'm attracted to your sister, too."

"I'm stopping at the store for brain bleach," I said, making fake gagging sounds.

Clarissa laughed, "You have to admit that she's pretty and has become a very interesting and confident young woman."

"That's the basic argument I made to my mom -- that Liz has become an adult and that she's capable of making her own decisions. And I have, in moments of extreme weakness, allowed that my baby sister is a pretty girl."

"I'd say that's fairly normal for siblings. She really needs you a lot, Mike. And I think she will even after she marries."

"I have to be very careful there," I said. "I can't ever be seen by Paul to be interfering. I may be the only friend he has for quite some time."

I pulled past the driveway, backed in, and parked. We went inside, got our things, and said 'goodbye' to my parents and Liz, and then Clarissa, Maggie, and I headed back to McKinley. We dropped Maggie at the Elberts', then drove to Doctor Blahnik's house, where, to our pleasant surprise, we discovered Milena and Joel were visiting. Derek offered Clarissa and me each a glass of wine, which we accepted, then the six of us went into the backyard.

The first thing I did was ask Doctor Blahnik to speak privately. I explained what had happened with Maggie and the Sheriff's department and that I was sure Maggie's dad would show up at the house at some point. She assured me there was nothing to worry about, and we went to join the others.

"You both received A's in my class," Milena said when I walked up. "And so did Sandy."

"Nobody should be surprised by that!" Doctor Blahnik said. "What courses are you two taking in the Fall?"

"Cellular biology, analytical chemistry with a lab, reproductive physiology, Modern Social Issues, and a supervised research project," Clarissa said. "Then, in the Spring, we have physical chemistry with a lab, a biology stats course, your Russian literature course, plus a general elective we haven't selected yet. Fortunately, our research project from last year covers this one. We just need to have Doctor Stanton sign off."

"Any ideas on your general elective?" Milena asked.

"I was thinking abnormal psych," I said. "I want to try to better understand what my friend Angie is going through."

"How is she?" Milena asked.

I shrugged, "They reduced her medication, and she's lucid, but that's about the best I can say. I'll see her again over the Summer. I've been talking to her for a few minutes on the phone each week, but that basically consists of me giving her a synopsis of what happened with me that week and her telling me she's going to work, seeing her therapist, and reading kids' books."

"Do they know what her problem is?" Doctor Blahnik asked. "I mean, if you can say."

"The concern is for schizophrenia or borderline personality disorder. According to her therapist, those two disorders manifest at around this time. The goal is to get her off the psychoactive drugs or at least reduce them enough so she can have some semblance of a normal life. But they haven't made any specific diagnosis in that regard at this point."

"What else is going on in your life?" Milena asked. "We haven't talked much since the wedding."

I smiled, "Because I was in your class, we couldn't really fraternize. Things are pretty good overall. I think the biggest change is that Kimiko decided, in the end, that she wants to return to Japan when she finishes her undergraduate degree. The other big change is my bishop wants to ordain me a deacon as soon as possible after graduation."

"Doesn't that prevent you from marrying if you aren't already married?"

"Indeed it does," I replied. "but there are a couple of viable candidates."

"Please don't take this the wrong way," Derek said, "but you'll really marry in the next year so you can accept ordination?"

"Probably, though I'm totally in control of the situation in that I can always say 'not yet' to the bishop. I'd prefer not to, though."

"The gorgeous blonde who comes to see you on Sundays?" he asked.

"She was the primary candidate for years, but she doesn't want to wait six or seven years to have kids. The problem with not waiting that long is the severely limited time I'm going to have for a wife and family because of my medical training. Tasha would not deal well with that at all, kids or no kids."

"I hear doctors have a ridiculously high divorce rate," Joel said.

"Which," Clarissa interjected, "is why Petrovich is screening candidates who can handle the bullshit we're going to have to go through for the next seven years so we can actually BE doctors!"

"Is it true that your first year as a doctor is basically legalized hazing?"

"That's a good way to put it," Clarissa said. "The working hours, working conditions, and working rules would be illegal in any other profession."

"As my dad said," I added, "it's illegal for a truck driver to drive more than ten hours a day, but the medical profession gives newly-minted doctors scalpels and makes them work thirty-six-hour shifts straight out of medical school."

"That's nuts!" Joel protested.

"As I said to my dad, you're preaching to the choir," I replied. "But for us to be able to change things, we actually have to go through it and become doctors."

"Crazy," Joel declared. "But on that note, we need to get home. SOME of us have to work tomorrow!"

"Poor baby," Milena teased with the appropriate condescending pout that made everyone laugh.

They said 'good night', and once they had left, Clarissa and I went up to my room, completed our bedtime rituals, then climbed into bed and snuggled together.



May 28, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday morning, I ran, Clarissa and I had breakfast together, and then I headed to the Quick Mart for my first day of work for the Summer, while Clarissa would leave about two hours later for her job in the Bursar's Office.

"Good morning, Mikhail Petrovich!" Mr. Sokolov said when he let me in the front door.

"Good morning, Alexey Ivanovich!" I replied.

"Come, I'll give you a full set of keys, and then I am going home! The store is in very capable hands!"

"Thank you! Who's working with me this morning?"

"A young woman named Grace. She just graduated from High School, and she's a very hard worker. Nancy will relieve you at 4:00pm."

We walked to the back of the store, and I put on my smock and a new name tag, which read 'Mike L. -- Asst. Manager'. Mr. Sokolov handed me the keys, including ones that would let me override the controls on the registers, shook my hand, and left the store, letting in a cute girl with jet-black hair in a 'pixie' cut and a very nice figure.

"I'm Mike," I said.

"Grace," she replied.

"How long have you worked here?"

"I started two weeks ago."

"OK. Go ahead and get your smock."

My new duties meant that under normal circumstances, I'd man the register, and Grace would do all the tasks I'd done previously. It was an interesting reversal, as I was now in the role Nancy had played when I'd first started. Grace was back a moment later.

"I have the checklist," she said. "Is there anything you need before you unlock the doors?"

"No. You can get started."

She nodded and headed towards the stock room, and I went to the front doors, unlocked them, changed the sign from 'CLOSED' to 'OPEN', and then went back to the register and began doing paperwork -- matching orders and delivery manifests. A few minutes after I'd unlocked the doors, a steady stream of morning customers came through the store, with the vast majority buying cigarettes, a newspaper, or pre-packaged breakfast food.

"Hi!" Maggie said, coming to the counter just before 8:00am.

"Ready for your first day at work?" I asked.

"Yes. This is obviously out of the way, but I have plenty of time because I don't start until 8:30am. Do you get a lunch break?"

"Yes. I usually go to the deli next door because the sandwiches are good and inexpensive."

"What time?"

"11:30am," I replied. "I have thirty minutes."

"Bummer. My lunch is at noon, for an hour. But I don't get any other regular breaks."

"I get two fifteen-minute breaks," I replied. "Why don't you come by Doctor Blahnik's house after work? You can have dinner with Clarissa and me if that works. Let me write down the address; it's on Elm, just west of 2nd Street."

I wrote down the address and handed it to her.

"I can be there about 5:20pm if I come straight from the law office. Does that work?"

"It does. See you then!"

She smiled and left, and a minute later, Grace came to the counter.

"That the girlfriend?"

"She's a girl I know from back home who I dated a bit last year. She just moved here. Have you worked with Nancy?"

"She trained me. She said you guys used to date."

"That's true. Are you planning on college?"

"Taft."

"Major?"

"Business. You're pre-med, right?"

"Yes. I'll be a Senior in the Fall."

"Cool. Anything you need?"

"A case of Marlboros and a case of Camels."

"People in this town smoke like chimneys!"

"And they're a high-profit item, not to mention they drive traffic into the store, and people buy other stuff."

"Is that why Mr. Sokolov keeps his cig prices 10¢ lower than everywhere else?"

"Exactly. He still makes a nice profit but pulls people in. It's the same reason he keeps the milk prices at least 5¢ lower, and sometimes as much as 25¢, although then it's a 'loss-leader'."

"You mean he loses money on the milk but makes it up on other stuff they buy?"

"Yes. That's why bread is usually on sale as well. You know where he makes the most money, right?"

Grace laughed, "I've seen the college kids buying multiple cartons of Coke and piles of candy, so yeah."

"And he sells a lot of beer during football season, but also around the Fourth, Memorial Day, and Labor Day."

"Let me get those cigs."

She left and was back with a hand truck with two cases of cigarettes. I broke open the cases and put the cartons on the shelves, opening one carton to stock the racks with individual packs. When I finished, Grace took away the empty cases, and I returned to waiting on customers and doing paperwork.

The day went well, and Grace was a hard worker, which boded well for the Summer. Just before 4:00pm, Nancy came in, and came to the counter.

"Hi, Mike," she said. "How was your day?"

"Good. Grace works hard, and there were no glitches. Who's working with you?"

"Walt. Another recent High School grad. I think you've seen him because he's been working for a few months. Grace just started the week before exams and was working after school. You usually come in on weekends or in the morning."

Walt walked in just then and I did recognize him. He went to the back, got his smock, and relieved Grace, who came and said 'goodbye', and I turned the store over to Nancy and headed for Doctor Blahnik's house.

III. Endings and Beginnings

May 30, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Hi, Mishka!" Tasha exclaimed when she came into the Quick Mart on Wednesday morning.

We exchanged a chaste hug, and she asked me to call Mr. Sokolov, which I did. He promised to be at the store within ten minutes to let Tasha into her new apartment.

"He'll be here in ten minutes," I said. "Where are your parents?"

"It's just my mom. My dad decided not to take the day off work. Mom's waiting outside."

A couple of customers came to the counter, interrupting the conversation, and by the time I was done, Mr. Sokolov had arrived. Tasha went outside with him, and he was back about ten minutes later.

"If there are any concerns, Mikhail Petrovich, she'll tell you. Just make a note of anything unless it's an emergency, and then call me, please."

"Will do!"

He left, and when it was time for my break, I called Grace to the register to cover for me.

"Is THAT the girlfriend?" she asked.

"Ex-girlfriend," I replied. "I don't have a steady girlfriend at the moment. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

Instead of putting my smock in the back room, I removed it, folded it, and stashed it behind the counter, then went out the front door, around the side of the building, and up the stairs to the apartment. The door was open, along with all the windows, and Tasha and her mom were busy cleaning.

"Anything I can do?" I asked. "I have fifteen minutes."

"Take my keys and bring the boxes from my trunk, please," Tasha said. "They're the heavy ones. Mom and I can easily get the rest."

It took me four trips up and down the stairs to move the boxes, which contained books, photo albums, and what I swore had to be bricks, as heavy as two of the boxes were. I stashed them in the corner of the large one-room apartment, as Tasha asked.

"I have five minutes," I said. "Anything else?"

"There's a folding screen, you know, like they use in Japan, which will hide my bed. It's in the back of mom's station wagon. If you bring that up, then all that's left are my clothes and toiletries."

I got the keys to the station wagon from Matushka Alexandra, went down to the street and saw the Antonovs' huge Caprice Classic station wagon into which I could probably fit my car twice over. I walked over, opened the rear gate, carefully pulled out the five-segment folding screen, which had a floral design, and leaned it against the side of the car. I closed and locked the rear gate, then picked up the screen and carefully manhandled it up the stairs into the apartment.

"Set it up about three feet from the bed, please," Tasha requested.

I carried it across the room and set it up as instructed. I checked my watch and, after a quick hug from Tasha, hurried back downstairs to resume work. Tasha came in just before my lunch break, and she and I went next door to the deli to get sandwiches.

"All set?" I asked.

"Yes!" she gushed. "My own place! Are you spending the night with me tonight?"

"If that is what you want, yes."

"It is, and it isn't, if you understand my meaning."

"Because it's the last time?"

Tasha nodded, "Yes. I'm going to talk to Nikolas on Saturday, so it has to be. Are you going to Vespers tonight?"

I shook my head, "I asked to be excused because I wanted to give you as much time as possible. And I was at the Vespers Divine Liturgy for the Ascension last night."

"It's OK for Clarissa to have dinner with us, if you want. I'll cook."

"I'm sure she'd like that."

"Have you talked to Lara?"

"I called her last night," I said. "Just to say 'Hello'. They're leaving for Miami tomorrow afternoon, and the ship leaves on Friday morning."

"And Jocelyn?"

"I spoke with her on Monday night," I said. "She'll be here on Saturday to move into the dorms. That's when I need to move my things from Rickenbacker 8 to Rickenbacker 2 for the Summer."

"And Clarissa is living at Doctor Blahnik's, right?"

"Yes. She started her job on Monday, and she's doing volunteer work at the clinic on Saturdays."

"So starting this weekend, everyone will be here. I think we should have a regular time together. What do you think of Sunday evenings at my apartment?"

I grinned, "Me and three gorgeous women? I'm game!"

Tasha laughed softly, "One of whom is lesbian and one of whom will likely be spoken for!"

"You're just no fun, Tasha!" I teased.

"And will you say that tonight, Mishka?"

"I believe my life would be at serious risk if I were to say or even imply that!"

"Correct!" she said with a smile. "I think, too, after tonight, I should call you Mischa or Mikhail Petrovich."

I nodded, "I agree, Tashenka."

"You didn't call me that very often."

"I never saw you as a cute little girl, which is what that implies. You calling me 'Mikey' was pretty much what my sister had done for years and was endearing. But it was only ever you two who did that. Vladyka ARKADY uses 'Mischa', Clarissa uses 'Petrovich', and Jocelyn uses 'Mik'."

"And Larisa Sergeyevna?"

"Mike, usually. Her stepfather is very much American, and they don't use Russian at home at all, so Lara doesn't exactly have that kind of background. She speaks Russian better than I do, though."

"EVERYONE speaks Russian better than you do!" Tasha said mirthfully.

"Not my dad and sister," I grinned. "And I'm working on improving my Russian."

When we finished our sandwiches, Tasha walked me back to the Quick Mart. She gave me a quick hug, then headed to Kroger's to do her regular shopping and stock her new apartment with food. During my afternoon break, I went upstairs to check on her, and she poured a cup of tea for me. I realized, as I sipped the warm liquid, that I was going to miss the intimacy of my relationship with Tasha. It wasn't the sex, though, that was awesome, but the closeness that we'd developed. Her relationship with Nikolas, should it develop as we both expected, would limit just how close we could be.

When I finished work, I headed back to Doctor Blahnik's house to wait for Clarissa. When she arrived, I grabbed my overnight bag, and we walked to the State Liquor Store and bought a bottle of chilled white wine. With that in hand, we walked to the Quick Mart and up the stairs to Tasha's apartment. She let us in and offered us drinks, which we accepted. She refused our offers of help for making dinner, so Clarissa and I went to sit on the loveseat.

"How is your job, Clarissa?" Tasha asked as she stirred diced chicken in a skillet.

"I didn't realize just how many clueless people there are in the world! Honestly, if you can't fill out your financial aid forms correctly, you have NO business being in college in the first place! I'd be embarrassed to sign my name on some of these forms!"

"What is it you're doing?"

"Verifying that all the information from the application and the financial aid forms match, then entering them into the computer. I also have to verify that any male applicants have filled out the form certifying they registered for the draft. And assign student ID numbers to any incoming foreign students who don't have Social Security numbers. How about you?"

"I start Monday. I have training for a week, and I'll take pharmacy courses at Hayes County Junior College. I already know quite a bit from working with my dad."

"Tasha," I said, "I meant to ask -- how did the hearing go?"

"Family Services submitted a new report which seems to have just removed the references to church but says the same thing -- that they think Sasha is being pressured and isn't capable of making a free choice. According to our attorney, they've begun opposing every application for marriage for someone under eighteen they find out about, no matter what the circumstances."

I sighed, "This is one of those cases where the government just needs to butt out. What happens next?"

"The judge will make a ruling, but the attorney thinks it will be favorable because both Mom and Dad signed; Sasha very clearly said this is what she wants, and Yaroslav spoke as well. He also submitted his work records and pay information to prove he can support her and the baby."

"Does the fact that he's not the baby's biological father matter?" Clarissa asked.

"Not really. If he were the baby's father, then it might sway the judge, but it's not supposed to have any effect."

"When is her birthday?" Clarissa asked.

"October 2nd," Tasha said. "But she'll only be seventeen."

"You know," I said, "I could develop a serious dislike for Family Services."

"Dad thinks they do more harm than good because they interfere too much in parents' rights."

"I am sure they actually do a lot of good with actual abuse, but my personal experience with them is that they are too interested in finding a reason to interfere rather than actually investigating. It's like my experiences with the prosecutor and police -- they cared only about finding something to charge me with, not on actually finding the truth or promoting justice."

"Listen to who's become political!" Clarissa teased. "A petition, a speech to Student Government, and now opining on government! Ladies and Gentlemen, the next Senator from the Great State of Ohio, Michael Peter Loucks!"

"Or, you can just shoot me now and put me out of my misery! I'll leave all of that to Melody!"

"The girl you dated when you were a Freshman?" Tasha asked.

"Yes. She's going to law school, and she'll be an attorney before Clarissa, Sandy, and I even graduate medical school!"

"Did you send in your applications?"

"The one for McKinley Medical School. The rest we'll put in the mail next week."

"Where?"

"UC, OSU, University of Pittsburgh, and Indiana University. But we'll get into McKinley for sure. We'll interview at the other schools if they invite us to, but only as backup options."

Tasha asked us to come to the small dinette table and served us each a plate with chicken, rice, and steamed carrots. I opened the bottle of wine and poured some for each of us, then said the usual prayers before meals, and we dug in.

"When do you propose to tell your dad about us?" I asked.

"On Saturday, I think. I'm going home to see Sasha and Vikusha."

"I wondered what her diminutive name would be," Clarissa said.

"Well, there are several, as usual!" Tasha replied. "'Viki', like in English, as well as 'Vitulya' or 'Vitusha'. And the short form would be 'Vika'."

Clarissa shook her head, "How you keep everyone's name straight amazes me!"

"But is it all that different, really?" I asked. "I'm Michael, Mike, Mikey, and Mik. And think about William, Will, Willy, Bill, and Billy, or Edward, Eddie, Ed, Ted, and Teddy. It's not really that different."

"Never mind!" Clarissa replied with a soft laugh. "It's like John and Jack, too."

"Exactly," I replied. "What do you plan to tell your dad?"

"That we spoke at length, examined what it would like to be married while you studied and trained, and how little time you would have for your family. Mom already knows."

"About everything?" I asked with a smile and an arched eyebrow.

"Not quite!" Tasha replied with a twinkle in her eye. "She has no details of where I asked you to put it or how big it is!"

I laughed hard, and so did Clarissa.

"You are BAD, Natalya Vasilyevna!" Clarissa declared.

"And Mishka will be reminded just how bad I can be once we finish eating and you go home!"

"I believe I remember," I grinned.

"Are you SURE, Mikhail Petrovich?"

"Suddenly, I think I should be scared!" I exclaimed.

"You should be!" Clarissa said, mimicking and paraphrasing Yoda. "You should be!"

We all laughed, then finished eating. Clarissa helped clean up, and when the dishes were done and put away, she hugged us both and left the apartment. Tasha locked the door, pulled down the blinds, and turned to me.

"No clothes for the next eleven hours!" she declared, unbuttoning her sundress and letting it fall away.

I needed no further encouragement and quickly removed my clothes as I watched Tasha remove her bra and panties, revealing her amazing body to me -- a body I wouldn't see again once I left her apartment in the morning.

"What can I do for you?" I asked with a grin.

"I know the very last thing will be slow and gentle, showing each other how much we care for each other, but before that, I believe I'd like you to fuck me silly! And not just in the bed! On the couch, bent over the dinette table, in the shower, and wherever else we can!"

"What's gotten into you?!" I asked.

"Nothing just yet! But you know what I want and where I want it! And if you prefer one of those times to be VERY naughty, you may!"

I held out my arms, and Tasha melted into them, pressing her wonderfully sexy body against mine. I did as she asked and WAS very naughty when I had her bent over the dinette table. We moved from there to the shower and, eventually, to her bed, where we made slow, passionate love before falling asleep in each other's arms.



May 31, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

When I arrived back at Tasha's apartment after my run, we took a loving shower together, and she made us breakfast. When we finished eating, we came together in an embrace, which lasted about ten minutes before I had to go downstairs to start work.

"I love you, Mischa, and I always will."

"I love you, too, Tasha, and I always will."

We exchanged one final kiss, which was soft and sweet, and then I went downstairs and into the Quick Mart. I turned on the light, put on my smock, and let Grace in, and ten minutes later, we were open for business.

"I hear you're also an RA for the Summer at Taft," Grace said.

"Yes. And during the school year. Are you living at home or in the dorm?"

"The dorm. I talked my dad into it because the idea of living at home as a college student really bugged me!"

"I hear you on that one! Did you get your dorm assignment?"

"Rickenbacker 8."

I laughed, "Welcome to my floor!"

"No way!" she said. "Seriously?"

"Yes, but you'll be on the girls' side, obviously."

"Now, where's the fun in THAT?"

"Coed rooms might be a bit too much for the University administration to stomach," I chuckled.

"Too bad! What are you doing this weekend?"

"Church and I need to move my stuff from 8 to 2, and a friend of mine will be here for Summer session, so I'll hang out with her. And then I'm having dinner with a few friends on Sunday."

"Another 'not the girlfriend'?" she asked.

"You seem awfully interested in my relationships for someone I just met!"

"You seem to only have female friends!" she countered.

"That's not quite true -- my best friend Dale went to UW-Madison, and my guy friends from school are away for the Summer."

"What church do you go to?"

"Saint Michael the Archangel Orthodox Church."

"What's that?"

"Russian Orthodox. Are you a Christian?"

"Sort of, I guess. We're Catholic but almost never go to church. Basically Easter, baptisms, weddings, and funerals."

"We're even more traditional and conservative than the Roman Catholic church."

"You're Russian?"

"On my mom's side. Her parents came over from Russia to escape the Communists. Sorry to be the ogre of a boss, but there's work to be done."

"Then buy me an ice cream some evening so we can talk."

I didn't want to be rude, but the LAST thing I needed at the moment was another girl in my life. That said, she was going to be on my floor, and that meant we'd have some interaction. I felt I could say yes, and so long as I didn't make any advances or flirt, I could be friendly. After all, I'd established the pattern of 'not the girlfriend' that she could fit neatly into.

"Ask me next week," I suggested. "I have plans tonight through Sunday."

"OK!" she said brightly.

We finished out the work day, and when Nancy relieved me, I went upstairs and retrieved my bag from Tasha's apartment, staying for a few minutes to drink some tea. We exchanged a chaste hug, and then I walked out of the apartment. Tasha closed the door behind me, closing a delightful chapter in my life. I walked to Doctor Blahnik's house, where I sat and talked with her while I waited for Clarissa to arrive, and once she did, she and I left the house to begin what she called our 'last date'.

We drove north to the steakhouse where I'd gone with Katy Malenkov on one of our early dates and enjoyed excellent steaks, baked potatoes with loads of butter, freshly steamed broccoli, and a dessert which could only be described as 'death by chocolate' -- chocolate fudge layer cake with chocolate fudge icing, chocolate ice cream, and chocolate sauce. I figured if anyone tested my blood sugar, it would easily show not just 'diabetic', but 'dead'.

"That cake probably should be illegal," Clarissa said as we left the restaurant.

"No kidding! They should just provide a vial of insulin with every serving!"

We got into my Mustang, and I headed south towards McKinley. Clarissa was quiet, and I simply listened to the radio and contemplated, once again, what she'd said she wanted to do. Her reaction to our first lovemaking gave me pause, and I felt I had to say something.

"You know we don't have to do this, right?" I said.

"It's not about 'have to' but 'should'," Clarissa replied.

"You know I was somewhat uncomfortable last time because of how you reacted."

"You mean not talking to you and then not sleeping with you for a few days?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "And your hesitance or reluctance or whatever you want to call it, combined with the lack of physical reaction."

"But you made sure I had two very good orgasms, even if it didn't happen while you were inside me."

"Yes, but it just felt, well, weird, I guess."

"If I were straight and nervous and couldn't orgasm from my first intercourse but could from oral pleasure, would you feel weird?"

"I suppose not."

"Has that happened to you before?"

"No."

"And even so, you knew the right thing to do -- ensure that your partner had orgasms, even if it meant orally pleasuring her after you ejaculated into her."

"That sounds so clinical," I said, laughing softly.

"You shoved your tongue into my freshly fucked pussy into which you had just cum! Better?"

"I'm not sure there's a good way to say it. You know my general aversion to using the coarser terms. I mean, I do use them in certain circumstances, but you're just, well, special."

"Which I think is part of your concern. I don't say 'problem' because it's not a problem; it's just a complicated situation all around. And I don't think you can compare it to any of the other girls directly because none of them are me."

"That's very true."

"And I know you're concerned about hurting me emotionally."

"Very."

"You won't," she said gently, putting her hand on top of mine, which rested on the shifter. "But I don't think anything I can say will totally alleviate your concern for me."

"Probably not," I allowed.

"Which is going to make you tentative, and THAT will likely make it even more difficult for you to pleasure me, even with your tongue."

"«ГОВНО» (*gavno*)," I sighed. ("shit")

"Let's wait until we get back to the house to continue this conversation, please," Clarissa suggested.

I nodded, and she patted my hand, then kept hers lightly on top of mine, moving with me as I needed to shift. I was completely out of sorts, torn between what Clarissa wanted, what I wanted, and what was the right thing to do. If I called our encounter in Marietta 'experimentation', I'd call it a failed experiment, but not because it would prevent us from being together; it wouldn't. On the other hand, a repeat wasn't simply an experiment, and I was concerned that Clarissa's reaction might be worse, to the point where it wasn't only a few days apart but a lifetime.

It was possible that my fears were unfounded, but I didn't think they were -- at least not completely. I loved Clarissa so much that I wanted to do what she'd asked, but I also loved her enough to need to ensure we'd survive this night as Petrovich and Lissa. Any other outcome would be a disaster, one which I was unwilling to truly countenance. I had to make the right decision, but I had no clue what that was or even how to make it.

I realized that, in the end, it had to come down to trust. Clarissa trusting herself to know her own feelings and me trusting Clarissa to honestly express them. Without THAT level of trust, our future relationship could never be what we wanted it to be. I was going to have to trust so many people in the future -- my professors, fellow medical students, fellow Residents, Attendings, and, according to every person I spoke to, OTHER than doctors and nurses. I also realized that if I couldn't trust Clarissa, of all people, in that way, how could I ever trust Lara or Maggie or whomever I asked to marry me to honestly tell me how they felt?

That didn't lessen my trepidation, and recalling what had happened in Marietta didn't help, either. I was concerned that if Clarissa showed any trepidation, I'd be unable to continue, which, in the scheme of things, might make them worse and create the very result I was seeking to avoid. With the ideas going round and round in my head, the only thing I was going to do was drive myself crazy. I took a few deep breaths, cleared my mind, and focused on the music coming from the Blaupunkt radio, which the original owner had installed in the Mustang.

When we arrived back at the house, we went straight up to my room, where I shut and locked the door.

"Petrovich, you're more nervous tonight than I was in Marietta."

"I know," I replied. "I'm worried about you."

"I know you are, and this will be a disaster unless you relax."

I couldn't help but laugh at the flashback her comment created.

"What?" she asked.

"I just flashed back to a conversation I had with Jocelyn in Cincinnati."

"Then I know exactly what to do. Get undressed."

"Lissa..."

"Trust me, please, Petrovich. Get undressed."

I nodded and removed my polo shirt, slacks, socks, and finally, my underwear.

"Lie down on the bed."

I pulled the comforter down and got into bed. Clarissa undressed and got into the bed, her torso across my legs and her head at the level of my groin. She smiled, gently grasped my partially erect shaft, opened her mouth, and slowly took my glans completely into her mouth. She sucked gently and swirled her tongue, and as I hardened, she slowly bobbed her head, taking just a bit more of me into her mouth with each bob. I felt her hand cup my balls as she wrapped her other hand around my shaft.

This was no longer what amounted to a French kiss of my glans but a slow, sensual blowjob, with Clarissa taking half my length into her mouth. She was making love to me, orally, to prove to me that she could do what she'd requested, and any doubt in my mind had disappeared when the tip of my glans touched the back of Clarissa's mouth. My pleasure was quickly building, and I made no effort to hold back.

Clarissa slowly raised her head and released me.

"Cum for me, Mike," she whispered.

I needed very little encouragement, and the instant Clarissa's lips closed around my shaft, I exploded into her mouth. She stroked me and slowly bobbed her head as jet after jet of cum coated her tongue and cheeks. I felt her swallow, then she raised up so that just my glans was in her mouth, sucked hard, and lashed me with her tongue. I groaned in pleasure that was so exquisite that it was almost painful. She released me, then slid up, and we exchanged a soft French kiss, which we held for about a minute.

"Now," she said, "you're going to pleasure me with your lips and tongue, then fuck me hard and fast for as long as you can hold out, and then we're going to make slow, sensual love all night, and you're going to show me what's possible."

"I am your humble servant," I replied. "If you don't have orgasms, may I use my tongue and lips?"

"You'd better unless you want to die!" she threatened with a silly grin.

"And there is quite a bit that is possible."

Clarissa laughed softly, "I do know what's possible! I said you were supposed to show me! Your penis is the only one which will ever penetrate any part of me, and you may penetrate EVERY part of me."

"Then lie back and allow me to feast on the savory delights hidden between your legs!"

Clarissa laughed, lay back, and spread her legs as wide as she could. I moved between her splayed legs, lowered my mouth to her labia, and pressed my tongue into her warm, silky folds. I made oral love to her, just as she had done to me, bringing her to three very good orgasms before I moved up and lodged my glans against her labia.

"What do you want, Lissa?" I asked.

"I want you to fuck me!" she growled. "Hard!"

Not wanting to disappoint, I pushed my hips forward firmly. My glans split her labia, and the first few inches of my shaft followed. I pulled back and pushed forward again, and to my surprise, Clarissa pushed her hips firmly up to meet

me, taking nearly all of my length into her. A third thrust was met the same way, and our pubic bones came together.

Clarissa wrapped her legs around my thighs and flexed her hips to grind against me.

"Hard and fast!" she growled.

I obliged, thrusting hard and fast, as requested, and she met every stroke with an equally firm upward thrust of her hips. As with our first time, we couldn't seem to quite get her over the edge, and after better than ten minutes of trying, I simply let my own pleasure build. I came hard, filling her with my release, and as soon as the last pulse subsided, I pulled out, slid down, and latched onto her clit with my tongue. As with the previous time, that did the trick, and Clarissa had two more good orgasms before I moved up to cuddle her.

"That," she said, "was VERY weird."

"You're a lesbian for Pete's sake!" I chuckled. "Having a guy slam into you for almost fifteen minutes is absolutely going to be weird!"

"I'm OK, too, Mike. I don't want to do it that way ever again, but I did want to do it."

"I think you might have more luck on top," I said. "You can control everything that way."

About fifteen minutes later, my thought proved correct as Clarissa rode me, giving herself her first orgasm from penetration. After that, we engaged in 69, and then, with her approval, I spread K-Y jelly on her rear opening and slowly and carefully pushed into her.

"Damn, Petrovich!" she gasped as I gently worked myself completely into her butt.

I pushed my hand under her, found her clit, and gently massaged her to an orgasm while I simply kept myself in her very tight rear tunnel. After a second orgasm for her, I slowly stroked in and out until I reached my own release. When my orgasm had run its course, I slowly pulled out, then picked up Clarissa and carried her to the tub. I set her in, turned on the tap, added bubble bath, and climbed in. I sat behind her and gently pulled her back to me, wrapped my arms around her, and held her.

"Remind me to never do THAT again," Clarissa said with a soft laugh about five minutes later. "Do you like it?"

"It's something I'll do if my partner requests it, but I strongly prefer regular intercourse."

"What about oral sex?"

"That I love to do, giving or receiving. And if you'll allow me, I'll pleasure you that way for as long as I can manage before we make love for the final time, and then after for as long as I can manage."

"Your jaw is going to be sore tomorrow!"

"And you're going to walk funny for a day or two!"

Clarissa laughed, "So true!"

"May I ask something?"

"How can I do all of this and tell you I can't do it for the rest of our lives?"

"That was the question I had in my mind."

"Would sex with only Violet or Hannah or Sarah for the rest of your life satisfy your true needs?"

"That's actually an interesting question," I replied. "Because what I need from my wife isn't sex, per se, but a partner in my endeavors. That's what will be fulfilling. That said, I see your point, and the answer to what you meant by your question is that it wouldn't satisfy me."

"That's the answer to your question, then. I love you, Petrovich, and in some ways, you complete me, but in others, I need a female. I like breasts and pussy more than I like dick; a lot more. A woman's touch, and me touching her, is, well, sublime. With you, and please do NOT take this the wrong way, it's purely physical, and more strange than it is exciting. I am glad I could do this with you, and I want what you just offered, but in the end, I'm a lesbian."

"I know," I sighed. "But that didn't stop me from hoping."

"And it shouldn't have. I hoped for the same thing. But just as you and Tasha agreed, there was a limit to what you could be for each other; that's also true for you and me. We can be best friends and soulmates, but we can't be husband and wife."

"I realize this is a hopeless sentiment, but if you change your mind at any time prior to my marriage, I'm yours."

"I know," Clarissa sighed, snuggling close.



June 1, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Dinner and a movie?" I asked.

"Sure!" Maggie agreed. "What movie?"

"If you're OK with it, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*; otherwise, there's a new *Indiana Jones*, as well as *Sixteen Candles* and *The Natural*."

"*Star Trek* is OK. We can see one of the others next week."

"You can pick, and you don't have to limit it to those."

"Where are we having dinner?"

"We both need to stick to our budgets, so I was thinking Frisch's."

"When does fasting start again?"

"Technically, after Ascension, but Vladyka said we should 'Party until Pentecost!'"

Maggie laughed, "When is that?"

"It's on June 10th this year."

"Frisch's is fine."

We left the Elberts' house and headed to Frisch's, where we were seated quickly in a booth. We reviewed our menus and placed our orders, and the waitress brought our Cokes after she put our order in with the kitchen.

"Do I have to sleep with you to win?" Maggie asked quietly.

"No, of course not," I replied gently.

"Would it help my chances if I slept with you?"

"There are considerations which are far more important than sex."

"Did you sleep with her? The Freshman?"

"I can't answer that question either way, and even if I could, it's not relevant."

"That means you have."

"It means I can't say one way or the other."

"If you hadn't, you would have said 'no'."

I shook my head, "No, I would say that I can't say."

"You were with Hannah."

"You have Hannah's word on that, not mine. I won't answer one way or the other."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. And the thing is, with regard to what happens in the future, it's irrelevant."

"You'd marry without doing it first?"

"Yes, if that's the right thing to do. And besides, you promised, in writing, not to disappoint!"

Maggie laughed, "I did. And you trust me?"

"Sex is actually pretty easy, and like anything else, you can learn to do it well."

"I guess it really isn't all that complicated; people just make a big deal out of it."

"I didn't say it wasn't a big deal; I said it was easy to learn how to do it well. But that's a concern for the future, not for now."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. Let's change the subject. Now that you've finished your first week of work, what do you think?"

"That being a lawyer is nothing like it is on TV! Mr. Thompson said that mostly what lawyers do is research and paperwork. I'm learning to fill out forms, how to file papers at the courthouse, and how to have papers served on people."

"Do you like it?"

"I'm not sure. It's all so new. But for sure, I can do it, and I'll be able to afford to take classes at night in anything I want, though I'll take some paralegal classes first, no matter what. You move into the dorms tomorrow, right?"

"Yes. Jocelyn will be here tomorrow, too."

"Will she go to church?"

"Not with us. She'll go to the Lutheran church on Sunday mornings. And Clarissa won't go with us every time."

"When should I talk with the priest?"

"As soon as you're ready. He remembers you from before. Basically, you'll need to attend catechism classes. Normally, that's a deacon's job; Father Nicholas is doing them for now. My suggestion is that you just come to church and attend Sunday School for the Summer. Read the book I gave you, say the morning and evening prayers, and see what you think."

"It's a prerequisite, right?"

"Yes, but it's not something you should do just because you want to be with me. It's a lifelong commitment, especially as a deacon's wife. And that means you really believe and are convinced that Orthodoxy is true. And I'll warn you upfront, you will have to talk to the bishop."

"Why?"

"Twofold -- one to ensure you're willing to be married to a deacon with all that entails and that you're spiritually ready for that commitment."

"Your life is VERY complicated!"

"I can see how you would think that, but this is all normal for me because I grew up with it. And medical school and Residency aren't complicated, just difficult. It's really simple if you think about it -- school, studying, labs, and practical training. Then on-the-job training in a hospital as Resident."

"Come on! It's not that simple!"

"Sure it is! It's simple but difficult. In fact, most things can be broken down into simple steps, even if those simple steps are themselves difficult to accomplish. Do you remember talking about chess? How the moves are very, very simple while the game is extremely complex?"

"Yes."

"It's the same idea. And I'm telling you all of this, some of which I've said before, because you're going to basically lose control of quite a bit of your life and have to put everything second to my medical career and, to some extent, my obligations at church. And you'll have obligations as the wife of a deacon, as well."

"And you just give up your life in that way?"

"Both are my callings," I replied gently. "I chose to make the trade-offs when I decided to become a doctor and when the bishop first asked me to be a subdeacon. The price is high, but I elect to pay it. There are several potential solution sets, but only one set of solutions works to achieve all my goals. And that means finding a partner who can handle what we'll have to go through."

"I'm not even sure what to say about that at this point."

"You have to come to terms with it, and that is exactly why I told you that whether or not we sleep together first isn't the deciding criterion; it can't be. And you made it very clear you don't want to fool around unless there's a real chance of a long-term relationship."

Maggie nodded thoughtfully but didn't reply. Our food arrived, and after I prayed, we began eating. Our conversation was much lighter, and we avoided relationship talk. When we finished eating, I paid the check, and we headed to the theatre to see the movie, which I thought was OK, but not great, and which

Maggie found entertaining. When the movie let out, I drove her to the Elberts' house, where we exchanged a nice 'good night' kiss before I headed back to Doctor Blahnik's house.

"How did it go?" Clarissa asked when I came into the living room, where she was watching TV.

"I basically hit her with both barrels about the future. I don't think she's quite as gung-ho and self-assured as she was before.

"Was she upset?"

"I don't think so. Call it a dose of reality that she has to come to terms with if she wants to have any chance at all."

"The same questions Lara is asking herself."

"Exactly. Are you sleeping with me tonight?"

"I'll sleep with you as often as we can until the future Mrs. Loucks, whoever she is, tells me I can't."

I smiled, took her hand, and we went up to my room. After our bedtime routines, we climbed naked into my bed, snuggled close together, and fell asleep.

IV. Colonel Schumacher

June 2, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, Clarissa left for her volunteer job at the local free clinic, and I headed to the dorm to move my things from Rickenbacker 8 to Rickenbacker 2. It took about an hour to move everything and get it set up again. I'd just finished when I heard a very familiar voice call my name.

"Hi, Jos!" I replied happily, holding out my arms.

We hugged and exchanged a gentle kiss, and then I pushed her cart down the hallway to her room.

"You could have come up to get me to help load your cart," I said.

"I didn't bring everything with me, so this is it. Is Clarissa working?"

"She's at her volunteer job at the clinic. She's skipping Vespers tonight to hang out with you. Maggie, Tasha, and I are going to church. Tasha wants to host Sunday evening dinner at her apartment, at least during the Summer. Clarissa and I thought that would be a good idea."

"Just the four of us?"

"Yes. I'll see Maggie for church, we have a regular Friday night date arranged, and I'll see her one other evening during the week. That means we see each other five times a week, which to me feels more than sufficient."

Jocelyn unlocked her room, and we went in.

"Have you and Tasha ended things?"

"Yes. She's telling her dad today when she goes home to see Sasha and Vika. Her mom already knows."

"How bad will this be?"

"Not very. Deacon Vasily will be upset, but Tasha's logic is sound, so he'll come around pretty quickly. Especially if she begins seeing Nikolas."

Jocelyn started unpacking directly from the cart.

"Who's your roommate?" I asked.

"A girl named Dona Bingham from Milford. I called Clarissa earlier in the week to find out about her. She's an incoming Freshman and business major; she took a year off after graduating from High School."

"Hopefully, she'll be cool. I have a two-hour orientation meeting at 10:00am, and I planned to meet Clarissa for lunch at 12:15pm. You're welcome to join us."

"Cool. Can I ask an important question?"

"If you can't, who can?"

Jocelyn laughed, "Which is always your answer, so I should just ask, but it seems like the polite thing to do."

"To warn the other person, a potentially difficult question is coming?"

"I guess so, yes. Who keeps your appointment book?"

"Appointment book?"

"For sleeping with you."

"Clarissa. You and I need to talk about how we're handling our relationship in that regard."

"I sort of figured that when school starts in the Fall and Lara is back, you have to be on your best behavior, so to speak."

"A lot depends on what Lara decides. And she is absolutely not the 'jealous bitch' type. She knows I'll have close female friends, and I've talked to her about you and Clarissa."

"Does Lara know?"

"That Clarissa is a lesbian? Obviously."

Jocelyn smirked, "That's what I thought. Tasha, Liz, and I know, but that's it, right?"

"No, she's out openly now. Tasha and Clarissa are becoming close friends, which I have to say, given Tasha's original reaction, is downright miraculous."

"Tasha just needed to break away from her dad," Jocelyn observed. "I think I got a very good picture of her over Christmas break and some insights into who she really is. I think you got those when she arranged her overnight visit last Fall."

I nodded, "Very true. How about you and I talk after lunch? Clarissa has to go back to the clinic, and I can't imagine any crisis occurring as kids move in today."

Jocelyn laughed, "THAT kind of talk? Like you and Milena?"

"If you have no objections."

"Given the last time I saw you was Spring Break, none at all!"

She finished unpacking, and I went with her to return the cart. When she went back upstairs, I headed to the Administration building for the brief orientation. I was glad I'd been able to skip the day-long orientation for new RAs, which had been held on Friday and would only have to sit through what amounted to a refresher. Dean Anderson spent the first hour going over the dorm rules, focusing on the changes from previous years, which mostly revolved around overnight guests. After she finished, the school nurse talked about handling health emergencies, which reminded me that I needed to renew my CPR card.

"I don't put up with any shenanigans, Loucks," Kelly Prager said, coming up behind me as I walked down the hallway towards the doors.

"And I don't put up with nosy busy-bodies who have WAY too much free time, which must be the case if they're worried about what goes on behind closed doors."

"You heard Dean Anderson; the rules are to be enforced."

"Then enforce them," I replied.

"That means YOU have to follow them. I know about your sleeping arrangements."

I stopped, "Whatever you think you know is irrelevant. What I do is my business, and I expect you to stay out of it."

"The lezzy isn't a student this Summer, and you have to sleep in the dorms every night unless you get express permission from Dean Anderson."

Which nobody had EVER bothered with in the past. Everyone was casual about it, and that included Dean Anderson, so long as someone agreed to cover. But if Kelly made an issue of it, then Dean Anderson would have to do something about it. And that created a real issue for Clarissa and me.

"Call her that again, and I'll bring you before the Student Arbitration Committee. And you know as well as I do that if you lose there, you lose your RA position permanently. The campus has a clear non-discrimination policy. I expect YOU to follow it."

"Perverts are taking over the world!" she protested.

"Look, if you want to be president of the 'Junior Anti-Sex League', that's your business. Leave me and my friends out of it!"

"The what?"

"Run -- don't walk, run -- to the library and check out a copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Read it. Learn it."

I turned on my heel and walked away, fully realizing that the rumors about Kelly were true. Now, I had to figure out how to survive the next eight weeks without killing her. I quickly walked to the dorm, where Jocelyn was waiting for me in the lobby. We left immediately and headed to the burger joint, where Clarissa was waiting for us in a booth. She hopped up and hugged Jocelyn, and then all three of us sat down.

"I had a nice chat with Kelly Prager," I said, by voice dripping with sarcasm.

"The rumors are true?" Clarissa asked.

"In spades," I sighed. "She made it clear she won't accept the casual 'cover for me' arrangements that everyone always used, AND she made a point of saying, and I'm quoting here, 'the lezzy isn't a student'. I told her if she called you that again, I'd take her to the Student Arbitration Committee for violating the non-discrimination policy. That's when she declared that 'perverts' were taking over the world."

"What rock did SHE crawl out from under?" Jocelyn asked.

"No clue," I replied.

"So now what?" Clarissa asked.

"Well, if we follow the rules to the letter," I said. "You could spend three nights a week with me, so long as no more than two were consecutive. So, something like Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday? But I won't be able to escape sleeping in the dorms without written approval from the Dean if Kelly decides to stick to her guns."

"What IS her problem?" Jocelyn asked.

"Well," I replied, "given the 'pervert' comment, I'd say she has a fatal case of toxic evangelical fundamentalism. That's the basic tack that the, ahem, 'Reverend' used to try to prevent ANY overnight guests."

Jocelyn put her face in her palm and shook her head.

"Right," she said, "because sex is only biologically possible after 11:00pm and before 6:00am, and only in a bed. Probably with all the lights out, too."

"My interest in Kelly's sex life, or Reverend Saddler's sex life, or the lack thereof for either of them, is in the negative range," I said. "I'd simply appreciate they give me the same courtesy."

"Fat chance," Clarissa said. "I suspect they also believe it's impossible to share a bed without sex and probably impossible for guys and girls to be close friends without having sex."

"Well..." I chuckled.

Both Jocelyn and Clarissa laughed.

"Did you meet your roommate yet, Jos?" I asked.

"No."

"Don't you have orientation, Jos?" Clarissa asked.

"Transfer students aren't required to attend if they have enough credits to be a Junior, which I do."

"Back to the earlier question -- what do you think, Lissa?"

"It's not perfect, but the last thing I want is for you to get in trouble. And I know you need the stipend and free room and board."

"I've actually thought about taking Doctor Blahnik up on her offer for Senior year, but Michelle is pretty cool, so I think I'll stick with the original plan."

The waitress took our orders and brought our Cokes.

"What if you marry?" Jocelyn asked.

"Doctor Blahnik was totally cool with me having a girlfriend live with me, so I don't think she'd have a problem with a wife living with me. And she made it clear we were welcome to have our study group at the house. With Milena gone and Derek away during the week, the house is basically empty, and I think Doctor Blahnik needs company."

Clarissa smirked, "So it's THAT offer you're going to accept!"

"What did I miss?" Jocelyn asked.

"According to Sandy, Doctor Blahnik has made it clear that she'd very much like some very personal attention from Mike."

"She flirts," I replied. "But she and Derek are a couple."

"Sandy was one hundred percent sure that they'd have swapped if you were game!"

"I have no interest in Derek," I replied, doing my best to sound serious but failing because I smirked.

"I think I might pay to see that!" Clarissa teased. "Though you'd greatly upset Robby!"

"I can't wait to meet this group," Jocelyn said. "They all sound like fun."

"You should talk with Sophia about rooming together for your Senior year," Clarissa said. "Mike, Sandy, and I will be out of the dorms, but she's just starting her Junior year now."

"I'll worry about that next Spring. Did you guys schedule your MCAT?"

"July 13th in Cincinnati," I replied. "I'll visit Angie and see Doctor Mercer that weekend as well. That reminds me, I need to put in the request to Dean Anderson for two nights away. Mr. Sokolov will cover that Friday at the Quick Mart."

The waitress brought our burgers and fries, and after we ate, Clarissa headed back to the clinic and Jocelyn and I headed back to the dorm and went into my room. I locked the door, we undressed, got into bed, made love gently, then cuddled together, leaning against the long pillow pushed up against the wall.

"Still planning on the reset?" Jocelyn asked.

"Yes. I think I actually let myself get a bit out of control in the past year."

"You have regrets?"

"That's a good question," I replied. "If I look back, each individual encounter makes sense, but the overall set of encounters doesn't."

"Your number is 'too high'?"

"Also a good question. I think, ultimately, I got used to having sex and allowed my weakness to define me. That, combined with my desire to have a regular sex partner, led me to where I am."

"Feeling that you somehow failed?"

"I certainly missed the mark," I replied.

"Besides Janey, who I know you think was a mistake, is there anyone else you wish you'd handled differently?"

"Mindy, for sure, but that's mostly because of how she's behaving now. And the situation with Janey is more one of not understanding what it was she was looking for. It's kind of like the situation with Nancy, though there, Nancy herself didn't know what she wanted. In both cases, I received mixed signals that they wanted both a casual and a serious relationship, which is somewhat contradictory."

"Not just 'somewhat'," Jocelyn observed. "But weren't both of those important to learning about how to have an adult relationship?"

"Sure, but I'm not sure sex was necessary to do that. The same is true for Melody, actually."

"I'm surprised you didn't mention your threesome."

"The end justifies the means," I said with a smile. "Milena and Joel are together because of that, and I learned a lot about myself, about relationships, and about life from Milena. That couldn't have happened except for she and I doing exactly what you and I are doing right now."

"I'd say it sounds as if you're conflicted about sex, which was your problem three years ago."

"Welcome to my world," I chuckled. "I've struggled with this from the beginning. And now, looking back, I'm disappointed in myself. Not in a way that's going to depress me or mess me up, but in a way that says I need to focus on proper intimacy BEFORE sex. And maybe I wait until I marry before I do it with anyone."

"Not to be selfish, but what about us?"

"You tell me what you need, I tell you what I can offer, and we find a solution which honors who and what we are."

"Did we just make love for the last time?" she asked quietly.

"I do NOT feel guilty or remorseful or depressed or any other negative thing about what you and I have done together. We let that damned accident define us for too long."

"And my lies to you?"

"All part of that same incident, Jos. Everything that happened from that moment until we reconciled has to be set aside."

"Or reset to before Cincinnati?"

"No. That can't happen for obvious reasons. I was WAY too immature three years ago."

"You mean to do what we did?"

"I mean to have the relationship we needed to have. You told me that, and I objected."

"And our time apart led you to do what I had hoped -- grow into the man I knew you could be. I knew there was a risk I would lose you because of that; I just didn't expect it to be the way it happened. I had to take that risk, Mik, because otherwise, you would never have come out of your shell."

"I know," I sighed. "The entire situation sucks."

"Let me ask you this -- do you need to be completely chaste?"

"It's something I've considered, but I also don't want to hurt you or fail to provide for your needs."

"But not at the expense of what you need, Mik. We both agree this has to end, eventually. We both know I have to move on and that I intend to. It's really a matter of picking the time and manner."

"Just tell me what you need, Jos," I said.

"Let me think about it. You have karate this afternoon, right?"

"Yes. And then church. We planned to get take-out Chinese and spend the rest of the evening at Doctor Blahnik's house."

"What time should I meet you there?"

"Call it 7:30pm to be safe."

"Mik?"

"Yes?"

"Make love to me?"

I smiled and very willingly did as she asked.



June 3, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I had a very interesting telephone call last night," Father Nicholas said when I joined him in the vestry on Sunday morning.

"Oh, I can imagine," I replied. "And what did Father Deacon Vasily have to say?"

"The bottom line? He asked me to invite you and Natalya Vasilyevna for what amounts to pre-marriage counseling."

"A tempered response compared to what I would have expected."

"I believe he controlled his emotions because he was speaking to a brother clergyman."

"What do you suggest we do?" I asked.

"I spoke at length with Tasha last night in confession, so I have a good idea of her view of the matter, and I've heard yours as well. I would suggest the three of us sit down together, talk it through, and then I can report back to Father Deacon Vasily."

I hadn't spoken to Tasha, so I didn't know if she'd approached Nikolas, and that might be a complication, but otherwise, I felt a couple of hours spent talking to Father Nicholas, if that's what it took was well spent to make things better for Tasha.

"I have no objection," I said.

"Are you free this afternoon?"

"I am."

"Then, if Tasha is free, we'll meet after lunch. I'll ask her when she arrives for Matins."

About four hours later, after Matins and the Divine Liturgy, I went to the parish hall, where I filled a plate for lunch and sat down at the table with Clarissa, Maggie, and Tasha.

"Lissa, will you take Maggie home in my car?" I asked. "Tasha will bring me back to town."

"Sure. Why?"

"Deacon Vasily called Father Nicholas and suggested Tasha and I needed relationship counseling."

"Of COURSE he thinks that!" Clarissa said with a knowing smile. "Sure, I can take Maggie home."

"I thought you guys decided you couldn't marry," Maggie said apprehensively.

"We did," Tasha replied. "My dad, on the other hand, does NOT agree. Don't worry at all, Marina Andreyevna! Mischa and I are not going to be a couple."

"Marina Andreyevna?" Maggie asked.

"That would be the closest Russian version of your name! There is a Saint Marina, who is also known as Saint Pelagia, and her feast day is July 20th. She is known as Saint Margaret in the West. And I asked Mischa, who said your father's name is Andrew. So you would be Marina Andreyevna."

"And Clarissa?"

"Svetlana Yakovovna," Clarissa said. "But this parish really isn't very Russian, unlike Mike's parish back home."

"Which isn't all that Russian these days," I replied. "And the Cathedral hasn't used Russian from the time it was founded. It's not a requirement for the OCA, but Tasha is VERY Russian."

"And Mischa is Russian when it suits him and not when it doesn't!"

I shrugged, "I'm an American of Russian heritage, and that heritage is important, but the key is that I'm an American. And Tasha agrees with that sentiment!"

"You two are just too funny!" Maggie said.

When we finished our lunch, I gave Clarissa the keys to my car, and after she and Maggie left, Tasha and I joined Father Nicholas in his office.

"I take it that both of you are certain that there is only one possible outcome from this meeting?" Father Nicholas asked.

"Yes," Tasha said quickly and firmly. "Mischa and I have talked about this for the past four years, and we believe that because of the demands of Mischa's school and training and my desire for a family as soon as I marry, marriage is not a good idea."

"I agree," I said. "I won't be able to devote the amount of attention to Tasha which she needs. Between class, studying, my clinical training, and then Residency, I simply won't be able to meet Tasha's emotional needs."

"I'm considering this similar to marriage counseling, and as such, it has the same protection as confession. In that context, I'm going to ask you both if you knew that before you became sexually active?"

"That's actually a difficult question to answer," Tasha replied. "I can't say for sure exactly when we came to the conclusion, but Mischa was completely honest about the demands of his training from the very first time we went to dinner more than two years ago. And as I told you in confession, I demanded a promise from him that he would keep us on the correct side of the line, and I was the one who insisted later that I did not want him to keep the promise. I had to argue with him, in fact."

"Which in no way relieves Subdeacon Michael of his responsibility to behave appropriately."

"I am responsible," I said, "but I agree with Tasha that it's not clear when we knew. We began to realize that we might come to an impasse about a year ago, but even then, it was more of a concern about the timing of marriage and children. It was talking about those things that revealed the problem and led to what amounts to an impasse."

"And neither of you feel that counseling will help you overcome these concerns? To break the impasse?"

"Father, Mischa and I both know nothing can change the demands of his training, so in that regard, counseling cannot help."

"But what about you, Natalya Vasilyevna?"

"I suppose it might be possible, but I'm afraid of what happens if I convince myself it will be OK, and then in time, I discover that it is not."

"We all take those kinds of risks, Tasha," Father Nicholas said gently. "And our commitment is to work through those difficulties."

"Father," I said, "I agree, but going into it with those kinds of questions seems to me to not be properly counting the cost. It would be different if Tasha didn't have those concerns now, but because she does, it seems foolish to pursue marriage. In effect, we're going into it already primed for failure."

"I believe you both are thinking in a mature way," Father Nicholas said, "and it's not my place to pressure you into something the two of you believe is not in your best interest. I'll simply say that if either of you think further counseling or conversation will help, I'll make myself available."

"What will you say to my father?" Tasha asked.

"That I spoke with both of you, individually and together, and I believe you've properly considered your future in a mature way, and that after all of that, neither of you have changed your mind. All I can do is offer counseling should you desire it, but neither of you desires counseling on THIS matter. I will, of course, expect to see you both regularly in confession and to seek pre-marriage counseling when it's appropriate."

"Yes, Father," I replied.

"Yes, of course, Father," Tasha added.

"Then there's no real need to continue unless either of you has anything you think we should discuss."

Neither Tasha nor I did, so we received Father's blessing and left the church. As she usually did, Tasha handed me the keys to her Volvo; we got in and headed towards McKinley.

"What do you think your dad will do now?" I asked.

"I'll talk to my mom, but I don't think Dad will do much other than be very upset with both of us. And you won't see him very often, really. I'll only see him when I go home to see Sasha and Vika."

"What time would you like us to show up at your apartment on Sundays?"

"Let's say 4:00pm? During the school year, what time does your study group start?"

"Usually around 7:00pm."

"Then, in the Fall, we'll start at 3:00pm, if that's OK, so you can leave just before 7:00pm. That way, our group has sufficient time together."

"That sounds good to me."

I parked Tasha's car in the spot behind the Quick Mart, which was reserved for the apartment. We got out, hugged, and headed to Doctor Blahnik's house, where Jocelyn would be waiting with Clarissa. When I turned the corner onto Elm, I saw a blue Ford sedan with an Air Force logo on it and knew exactly who it had to be. I thought about going back to the dorm but decided it was better to simply face the situation head-on.

"Mike Loucks?" a man in an Air Force uniform with silver eagles on his epaulets asked.

The name tag 'Schumacher' made it clear that it was Maggie's dad. I walked right up to him.

"Good afternoon, Colonel Schumacher," I replied.

"Where's my daughter?" he demanded.

"She's not here, Colonel, and I don't have permission to give you her address."

"I don't give a tinker's damn about 'permission'. WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER?!"

"Colonel, she's an adult, and she chose to leave home."

"You're directly involved, Son. And I mean to find her and find out exactly what you did to cause her to act rashly. And I mean to hold you responsible for anything that happens to her, and that includes anything of which I do not approve. Do you hear me?"

"Colonel, your wife called the Sheriff and they stopped my car, verified that Maggie was over eighteen, and that she wanted to leave home. I may not be an attorney, but I know that means I'm not in any legal trouble."

"I'm not talking about the law, Son. I'm talking about me. You and I have a problem and trust me, I WILL resolve that problem in my favor."

"You've made your position clear," I replied. "Good afternoon, Colonel."

I walked past him, feeling his glare as I walked up to the house, went inside, and shut the door.

"I take it you saw the military officer outside?" Clarissa asked.

"I did. That was Maggie's dad, Colonel Andrew Schumacher, US Air Force. I take it he came to the door?"

"Yes. Doctor Blahnik told him you don't live here; you only registered your car here, and that Maggie wasn't here. I guess he decided to stake out the house. What did he say?"

"He's unhappy, and he said he'll hold me responsible, whatever that means. I know I'm not in any legal trouble because she's eighteen and left home voluntarily."

"More like escaped!" Clarissa said.

"True. I'm pretty sure I can safely ignore him. Tasha asked us to be at her apartment at 4:00pm."

"How did things go with Father Nicholas?"

"About the way I expected," I replied. "He'll tell Tasha's dad that she and I have handled our decision in a mature way and that neither of us feels counseling will change our minds. Jos, did you meet your roommate?"

"Yes. She's really sweet, and she's a lot like us. She lives with her parents outside of Milford in a small house and really likes small towns. She's majoring in business and wants to eventually have her own insurance agency somewhere in the Greater Cincinnati area. She's taking Summer school every year so she can finish in three years."

"Another serious student. Do you know her room assignment for Fall?"

"Rickenbacker 6."

"It would have been nice to know we had a serious student amongst our Freshmen."

Just before 4:00pm, the three of us headed to Tasha's for the evening. We had a wonderful time, and when we finally left, Clarissa returned to the dorms to spend the night.



June 4, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday after work, I decided to walk to Maggie's house rather than take my car. I had thought about it and didn't put it past her dad to be watching my car or having someone watch my car, and I wanted to talk to Maggie about the situation without a confrontation. I took my time, but I was early and was sitting on the front porch of the Elberts' house when Maggie arrived home from work.

"Mike?! What are you doing here?"

"I decided to walk over because your dad showed up at Doctor Blahnik's house yesterday and demanded to know where you were. I refused to tell him, and he took offense at that and promised he'd resolve this in his favor."

"Do you think he can find me?"

"Eventually," I replied. "But you don't have a car, and if you don't change your license right away, there isn't really an easy way to find you. He doesn't know your brother arranged the job for you or what kind of job you do."

"What about the church?"

"I suppose he could do that," I replied. "If he does, you just tell him you don't want to talk with him and walk away. If he gives you too much grief, you let Father Nicholas know, and we can talk to Katy's mom, who's an attorney."

"OK, I guess. I just hate that he's being such a jerk."

"It might help if you call your mom and just tell her you're safe and you're not coming home."

"Maybe. I'll think about it. What are we doing tonight?"

"Do you want to see a movie?"

"Sure. My pick, right?"

"Yes."

"*Sixteen Candles*. Dinner first?"

"Yes."

"Make out after?"

I nodded, "Yes."

We walked to the diner, had a nice meal, then headed to the movie theatre. I'd expected a sappy love story, but it turned out to be a comedy, which I enjoyed greatly. There was a romance, but it wasn't the main theme and wasn't sappy. When the movie finished, I walked Maggie to the Elberts' house, and she invited me in. She got a pair of 7-Ups from the fridge, and then we went to her room.

Maggie pointed to a large beanbag chair, and after I sat down, she sat in my lap and snuggled close. I put my soft drink bottle on the floor, took Maggie's from her, and we exchanged several soft kisses. Maggie moved her hand to mine and lifted it towards her chest.

"Maggie," I protested gently. "There's no need to push things."

She sagged a bit, "Is there something wrong? Is it the other girl?"

"Nothing is wrong, and it's not the other girl. It's me wanting to take things slowly and carefully and not make any mistakes."

"You're worried because I asked if sleeping together would make a difference."

"That is one consideration, yes."

"And if I wanted to?"

"According to you, that would require an exclusive commitment to 'Team Maggie' which I'm not ready to make at this point. I realize you said you weren't requiring a commitment to marry, but that if we went to bed together, I'd have to commit to only being with you. And that makes sense to me."

"You don't want to?"

"That's a TOTALLY different question! I do! But wanting to do something doesn't mean you should do it. And as I said, I'm simply not ready to make the commitment necessary for that at this point."

"And if I said it wasn't a commitment?"

"I'd be concerned that you were going against your nature in an attempt to change the situation and that there's too much risk for you to take, hoping that it works out the way you want it to."

"You remember I said I didn't need to be a virgin on my wedding night, right?"

"Yes, but you also made it clear it's not something you would do casually, and I don't want you to violate your principles. How would you feel if, and this is just

hypothetical, we went to bed together, and not long after I told you I felt another girl was a better match?"

"I guess I'd probably feel used."

"And here's the ultimate tricky problem -- again, hypothetically speaking, how long after we went to bed together would it be OK for me to break things off because I felt some other girl was a better choice?"

"Are you saying you don't think we should unless we're engaged or planning on getting engaged?"

"I'm just asking you to think about the possible ways things could turn out. Remember what I said -- I am not opposed to waiting until a potential wedding night if that's the right thing for us to do. What I absolutely don't want to do is hurt you or make you regret something you've done."

"You sound like you've made a mistake in that way."

"I've made some poor decisions about relationships, going all the way back to High School. Now, I have a chance to do things the right way."

"What's the right way?"

I smiled, "I'll let you know when I figure it out!"

"Then how do you know what to do?"

"I'm working on that! But what I do know is that going to bed together today is NOT the right thing to do."

"How far is OK?"

"Do we need to push things?" I asked.

"I don't know. I've thought so much about doing it after those times we kissed."

"And being a guy, I've thought about it pretty much every waking moment from age fourteen until now, and a lot of sleeping moments, too!"

Maggie laughed, "Typical."

She kissed me, and that led to an enjoyable fifteen-minute make-out session. I left the house at about 10:00pm and walked back to campus.

When I got to the second floor of the dorm, I walked down the hall to Jocelyn's room and knocked.

The door was opened by a very sexy girl with flowing brown hair and a killer smile.

"Hi," I said. "You must be Dona."

"That means you must be Mike! Hi!! Come in."

"Thanks. Hi, Jos! Interested in some music?"

"Sure. Do you mind if Dona tags along?"

"Not at all."

The girls followed me down the hall to my room, where I put on *Born in the U.S.A.* by Bruce Springsteen. I offered the girls soft drinks, then got them from the fridge, opened the bottles, and handed them each one.

"I hear you're from near Milford," I said.

"That's right. My parents live a couple of miles outside of Milford, just off Route 28. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes. A friend of mine is being treated by a psychologist who has an office on Route 28, about a mile east of Five Corners."

"That's about four miles from where we live. Is your friend from Milford?"

"No, she's from Anderson Township and went to Turpin."

"You're pre-med, right?"

"I am. Jocelyn says you're a business major and want to run your own insurance company."

"That's the long-term goal. I have to get my license first, which means most likely working for someone else. I'll probably get a real estate license as well just so I have multiple options."

"That sounds like good planning to me. What did you do during your year off?"

"I worked for a car dealership doing paperwork in the service department. That let me save enough money so I don't have to work during the Summer and can take classes. I wasn't initially planning on college, but then decided it was a good idea, and Mom and Dad can afford the in-state tuition."

"You're trying to graduate in three years?"

"I can do it. It'll just be busting my butt, but I'm used to it. I worked thirty hours a week and still ended up with a 4.0 average in High School."

"Did you play sports?"

"No way! I was in the Latin club and was President my Senior year."

"I took Latin in High School," I replied. "It made sense for my medical career. Why did you take it?"

"Because there was only one teacher who taught Spanish and French for Freshmen, and she was a complete bitch. They called her 'Miss Piggy' because she looked and acted like the Muppet. The other option was German, but I wasn't really interested, so that left Latin if I wanted to have my foreign language requirement for college. Did you play sports? You look like you're in good shape."

"Karate," I said. "And I run every weekday morning. I was in the chess club. Total nerd."

Dona laughed, "My friend Larry from back home is a really good player. He was on the Milford team and was President of the Latin club when he was a Senior. He's pre-med, too, at UC. Did you play our school?"

"Only once, in a regional. We mostly played teams north and east of us."

"Where are you going to medical school?"

"We sent applications to McKinley, OSU, UC, Pittsburgh, and Indiana."

"If you visit UC, let me know. I'll put you in touch with Larry."

"Cool. Where does he want to go?"

"UC. His mom has some kind of connections there because she's a nurse, so I think he has a lock to get in. He's super smart, and he's a real hunk; it's too bad he's gay!"

"A very close friend of mine, who is very pretty and who I would very much love to date, is lesbian, so I know the feeling! You'll meet her at some point."

"I think I did," Dona said. "Clarissa, right?"

"Yes."

"She hung out with us for a couple of hours. She left about twenty minutes before you showed up. She seems really nice. She's pre-med, too, right?"

"Yes."

"What do you drive?"

"Mustang. You?"

"Toyota Celica. Manual?"

"Yes. Yours?"

"Of course!"

"And next comes the 'my car is faster than your car' argument," Jocelyn teased.

"You're the leadfoot, Jos!" I chuckled. "I pretty much never go more than about five over, no matter what."

"I'm with you, Jocelyn," Dona said. "Why have a fast car if you aren't going to drive it fast?"

"I've told Mike that for YEARS!" Jocelyn exclaimed.

"And I have the several hundred dollars in my pocket you spent on speeding tickets and zero points on my license!"

"He was the consummate 'goody-two-shoes' in High School," Jocelyn said. "He's lightened up just enough to be fun."

"I love you, too, Jos," I chuckled.

"You two have known each other forever, right?" Dona asked.

"Since the first day of kindergarten," I said.

"Did you guys ever date?"

"That," Jocelyn sighed, "is a VERY long story."

V. Bittersweet Moments

June 5, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Do you want me to sleep at Doctor Blahnik's house tonight?" Clarissa asked when she arrived at the dorm early on Tuesday evening so we could go to dinner.

"No," I replied. "Ice cream with Grace isn't a date. And besides, you know the score."

"So this doesn't end with her licking your cone?" she teased.

I laughed, "No. I won't be more than an hour or so."

"I'll hang out with Jocelyn and Dona. I don't want Kelly to complain I was in your room without you here."

"She's driving all of us nuts," I sighed. "And it's only Tuesday of the first week! But forget her for now; let's go get Jocelyn and Dona so we can have dinner."

The four of us left the dorm for the cafeteria, and after we ate, Clarissa went with them while I walked to Verner's to meet Grace. She ordered a turtle sundae, and I ordered my traditional single scoop of chocolate in a sugar cone. I'd gone away from that for a time, but it seemed as if my life was going in a bit of a circle, with old habits and old attitudes returning, though tempered by three years away from home at college.

"It's your dime," I said with a smile when we sat down at a table near the front window. "Start talking!"

Grace laughed, "Nancy said you could be a real smart aleck if you were in the right mood. I hope I get more than three minutes for my 10¢!"

"I don't know if you noticed, but Ohio Bell raised the cost of a call to 25¢. Well, I guess they're calling themselves 'Ameritech' now."

"You said 'dime' first!"

"True," I replied with a grin. "Though that's the idiom. How much has Nancy told you about me?"

"A bit. Why?"

"All the questions about girlfriends. It almost seemed as if you were trying to dig for information."

"I was!" Grace replied with a twinkle in her eye. "For ME! I only met Nancy a few weeks ago, and other than the fact you guys tried dating a few times and she thinks you're a super-nice guy, we didn't talk much about you. I'm not her spy or anything, though I guess I can see how you might think that."

"I'm actually seeing someone," I said.

"Steady?"

"No, but she could be at some point in the future."

"But you're still a free agent?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Me, too. And I'm not looking for anything serious, just someone new to hang out with and do stuff occasionally. Someone intelligent who can carry on a conversation and won't bore me to tears. And you're going to be RA on my floor for all of my Freshman year, so I thought maybe we could be friends."

"I'm always open to new friends," I replied.

"What about hanging out sometimes? You don't even have to call it a date if that's a problem for the girl you're seeing. I'm guessing she's OK with your friends because otherwise, you wouldn't say it might be serious."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I'm pretty much open to anything," she said, her eyes twinkling. "I bowl, but not very well; I play mini golf, and I'm OK at that; I roller and ice skate pretty well; I like movies, walks in the rain, and ice cream."

"Thank you, Bachelorette Number Three!" I teased.

Grace laughed, "I guess I did sound like *The Dating Game*! But then I'd have to add something like 'making whoopee' or whatever euphemism they used to get past the censors and imply that sex was part of the date."

"My parents thought that show was funny, but I only ever saw a couple of episodes. I know the basic way it worked. My mom told me she read that one of the guys who was the one interviewing the three girls was a rapist and murderer."

"Whoa! No way?"

"Supposedly."

"YOU aren't a rapist or a serial killer, are you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I've drowned Snap, Crackle, and Pop in milk many times at breakfast," I smirked.

"SERIAL, not CEREAL, you nut!" Grace laughed. "But I guess Nancy was right about your sense of humor. It's goofy."

"Ah-hyuck!" I replied, trying to sound like Goofy from the cartoons.

"OK, you're WAY funnier than she suggested!"

"You caught me on a good day," I chuckled. "And when she first met me, I was seriously humor-impaired."

"That no longer appears to be a problem."

"Your insight serves you well," I replied, doing my best Obi-Wan Kenobi impression.

"Too funny! So, besides moderately good impressions, what do you do for fun?"

"Play pool, play chess, mini golf, go to the movies."

"I play chess, but I'm not very good."

"Ever play 'strip chess'?" I asked with a silly grin.

"Is that like 'strip *Monopoly*'?"

"No clue. I've never played either, though I know the rules to 'strip chess'. How does 'strip *Monopoly*' work?"

"You get less money from the bank, and each item of clothing is worth a fixed amount. Anything you can do with cash, you can do with clothes, and anything you can do with property, you can do with clothes. If you run out of cash, you're required to pay with clothes, and they can be bought and sold or auctioned, just like properties. And to keep people from ditching, you put up a hundred bucks of real money. If you stay in the game until it's over, you get your money back. If you leave or refuse to pay with clothes, the players who finish split your hundred bucks."

"And you've played this before?"

"Twice. Once was after Senior Prom with a bunch of people in a hotel room. The other time was New Year's Eve two years ago at a friend's house. But that's only fun if you have five or six people. What are the rules for 'strip chess'?"

"Each time a pawn is captured, you kiss, and each time a piece is captured, you have to take off one article of clothing. Winner gets oral sex from the loser."

Grace laughed, "I can see why a guy would like that! He gets blown or gets to eat the girl, so win-win because if he's any good, she's going to demand that he have sex with her!"

"That is exactly what the person who told me about the rules said!"

"Sounds like fun! I'm game!"

I had just neatly teased and joked myself right into a corner of my own making. Grace seemed like someone who would be fun to hang out with, who had a good sense of humor, and who also happened to have a nice, curvy body. And the idea of playing 'strip chess' was appealing. But it took me right back to the debate I

was having with myself about sex. I'd just decided, mostly, to be chaste, though not just yet.

Jocelyn and I hadn't stopped making love, but we both agreed it would end Wednesday night. She had been asked out on a date for Friday and had accepted, and we both felt it was wrong for her to be having sex with me while starting to date, despite our desire to be with each other. We'd likely sleep in the same bed, at least for a time, though if she were to get serious with the guy, that would no longer be possible.

Maggie was also a consideration, but in my weird way of thinking, I treated girls who were possible candidates for marriage differently from what Clarissa called 'flings'. I'd told Clarissa that Violet had been my last fling, but sitting here with Grace, having joked and teased myself into a position where I could play 'strip chess' with someone, I was seriously reconsidering.

"Not to be a wet blanket," I said, "but let me think about that, OK?"

"Because of your girlfriend?"

"It's more complicated than that. Let's talk later in the week, OK?"

"Sure," Grace agreed. "Either way, would you like to hang out sometime?"

"I believe I would."



June 6, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I've dreaded this day," Jocelyn said when she joined me in my room on Wednesday evening after Vespers.

"Are you having second thoughts?" I asked.

"No, it's a bittersweet moment. I'm just dealing with the fact that this part of our relationship has to come to an end. I actually think it'll be worse when I'm no longer able to sleep in your bed. Having you hold me just feels so right."

"And holding you feels so right, too."

"We can do anything you want tonight, Mik. I mean that. Literally anything."

"That would be a mistake of epic proportions," I replied. "We need to make tender love, and nothing more complicated than that. We'll ruin it with some crazy, over-the-top ending."

"You sound so sure. Why?"

"A close friend of mine had a beautiful, sweet love affair, which was mostly just simple lovemaking. They had to be apart, and she decided for their last couple of nights, they'd just go crazy and try anything and everything, no matter how wild. It ruined their relationship, and it took years to repair."

"You're talking about Milena and Joel, aren't you?"

"I should deny it, but I could never lie to you."

"You basically reconfigured our relationship to match what you had with her, so I can see why you feel that way. And if you feel that way, then we should do what you say. Not that I'm complaining, mind you; I love making love with you. I just thought maybe you'd like to try some stuff you hadn't tried before."

I chuckled, "I'm not sure there's anything left that I'd want to do."

Jocelyn laughed softly, "Tasha was a real surprise, wasn't she?"

"Yes, but she shouldn't have been. I should have recognized the signs, but all I saw was her conservative front, despite her showing me glimpses of her other side."

"Just so you know, she, Clarissa, and I had VERY detailed conversations!"

"Including assessing my performance?" I asked with an arched eyebrow. "9.2 from the Russian judge?"

"More like 10.0 like the Olympic gymnast, Nadia Comăneci!"

"The Eastern Bloc judges always screwed over Americans when they had the chance," I replied. "And this year, the Olympics are going to suck because the Russians are boycotting to retaliate for Carter's stupid boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980. All that did was hurt our athletes; it didn't affect ANYTHING with regard to Afghanistan. But I'm not sure I'm comfortable with you discussing my technique!"

Jocelyn laughed, "It wasn't like that! We both agreed and told Clarissa that you were a skilled, attentive lover."

"I hope Liz wasn't there for THAT conversation!"

Jocelyn laughed harder, "We're not THAT cruel. To Liz, I mean."

"Of course," I replied deadpan.

"You know we all love you, Mike, and we all want you to be happy. Tasha and I actually both wished that Clarissa was truly bi because then..."

"I know. But it's not to be. I did tell her if she did wake up one morning and discover she was straight, I'd marry her immediately, no matter what the situation was. Well, so long as I wasn't already married. Tell me about the guy."

"Bill Ebersole. He'll be a Senior. He's from McKinley, so he doesn't live in the dorms, and he's a poli-sci major. He had trouble with Calculus first semester so he's retaking it this Summer."

"Long-term goal?" I asked.

"He's planning a Master's in foreign relations, most likely at OSU."

"Bring him around when you're ready."

"I will. I think you'll like him."

"I hope so! If this eventually turns serious, he's going to be a close friend."

"Did you decide what to do about your minor peccadillo?"

"It's not a peccadillo," I replied. "Well, at least not yet. It's just me trying to figure out what's OK and what's not OK all over again."

"You're hung up on the 'too many', aren't you?"

"It did kind of get away from me, at least according to what I talked about with you and others that Summer after High School graduation and a bit since."

"I suppose you have to ask yourself, at least in THIS circumstance, which would you regret more? One more girl, or not playing 'strip chess', something you've been dying to play since you heard about it when we were fifteen?"

"When you put it that way, it makes me lean a bit more towards it, but I keep asking myself where the limit would be."

"Isn't it basically the end of August? If Lara comes back and says she wants to give it a go, you're not going to see anyone but her. If she decides against it, I think you'll end up with Maggie unless something really bad happens between you two. If that happens, well, then I'm not sure. So there is a limit, if you will. But you have to decide if your self-imposed 'one more is too many' is really how you feel, or if something else is causing you to feel that way."

"What do you mean?"

"Given what you've told Clarissa and me about Maggie, I wonder if you feel guilty in denying her while fooling around with other girls? Or maybe it's Lara who you feel guilty about? You know, cheating even if you aren't really cheating."

"You know I have a different way of thinking about the girls who I might marry, weird as it sounds."

"But it's not really. If you both just want to casually fuck, it's not a big deal, but if you think it's for the long term, suddenly the math changes, if you will. Think about what would have happened had you and Emmy not broken up because of her dad. You and Emmy agreed on a casual fuck, but by the time you got there, the landscape had changed in such a way that you two were going to be steady until her dad lowered the boom."

"Things were really complicated back then because of the accident, but that's basically the case. Becky could have turned out that way, too, but she's too far away, and we hardly talk at all these days."

"That started as a casual fuck but led to something that might have been, if distance weren't a problem. It was after that you started trying to sort things out, and the way you treated different girls depended on what you felt the future might hold."

"True. I guess I'm not sure which way is best. At times, it seems like chastity is actually easier because I don't have to make any individual decisions."

"Have you lost trust in yourself?" Jocelyn asked.

"I think it's more not wanting my weakness to control me."

"I'd say it isn't if you're carefully thinking things through."

"I wouldn't be so sure," I chuckled. "Resistance is difficult."

"But not futile. Mindy is the perfect example of your willpower overcoming your desires."

I shook my head, "No, it's not, because I don't desire Mindy."

"Sorry, I should have realized that," Jocelyn said. "I'm not helping much, am I?"

"Sure you are," I said reassuringly. "We're talking. But we've probably talked enough, and it's time to make love."

"All night?"

"All night."



June 7, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I know I'm sounding like a broken record, but Kelly is a REAL bitch," Jocelyn sighed on Thursday evening.

She, Clarissa, Dona, and I were sitting in my room listening to Bruce Springsteen and drinking Cokes.

"Now what?" I asked.

"She said she smelled pot in Darcy's room. I guess she and Darcy had an argument over Darcy's boyfriend staying over, so Kelly decided to get even."

"And?"

"Nothing. Darcy's only vice is pre-marital sex! She doesn't smoke or drink. But her boyfriend stayed two nights, and Kelly took it upon herself to lecture Darcy about not tolerating a third night. Darcy objected, and they had an argument. That's when Kelly called Campus Security. They came over, said they didn't smell anything, checked Darcy's room, and left."

"Jesus," Dona said. "That chick needs to get stoned, get drunk, AND get laid. Maybe that will get her to lighten up!"

"Doubtful," I replied. "Not to mention the fact that all three of those are things she'd NEVER do."

"I used to kind of think like her," Dona continued, "you know, only have sex with the guy you married, even if you did it before your wedding night. But I met a guy who changed my mind. Well, I changed my mind after I made a complete mess of things with that guy."

"High School is all about learning how to have good relationships," I said. "And I messed up big time myself. Heck, I've messed up since then."

"Haven't we all?" Jocelyn asked. "Did you lose that guy, Dona?"

"I'm not sure I ever had him. He was seeing another girl pretty seriously, but maybe if I'd played my cards right, who knows? After I messed things up, I ran into him because my car broke down. We got together again, but he's in Chicago now, and I haven't seen him in over a year."

"Chicago? Did he happen to graduate two years before you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"His name is Steve, right?" I asked.

"Yes!" Dona exclaimed. "You know him?"

I shook my head, "I know OF him. To cut a long story short, that friend of mine who went to Turpin is friends with a girl he used to date."

"Small world."

"It is," I agreed.

"What are you guys doing tomorrow night?" Dona asked.

"I have a date," Jocelyn said. "My first one with Bill."

"I have a date, too," I replied. "I'm seeing Maggie."

"I have a date, three!" Clarissa said. "Her name is Abby, and she works at the Free Clinic."

"And I'm the Old Maid, as my mom would call it," Dona groused.

"When school starts in the Fall, there will be plenty of guys around," Clarissa said. "And our group of friends hangs out together a lot, not as couples. Well, the couples are there, but we do stuff as a group."

"Thanks. I'd like that. Starting out with friends makes things easier."

"I have some homework to do," Jocelyn said, "so I'm going to go back to my room."

"I should do some, too," Dona said.

Jocelyn and I hugged and kissed each other, Dona surprised me with a quick hug, and then the two of them left. I shut and locked the door, Clarissa and I completed our bedtime routines, and then got into bed naked together. We spooned, and I put my arm around her, being careful to rest my hand on her stomach, not too high and not too low.

"She likes you," Clarissa said.

"Dona?"

"That hug was a dead giveaway, not to mention the slight flash of disappointment when you said you had a date tomorrow."

"Forget that for a moment! Who is Abby?"

Clarissa laughed, "A nurse at the Clinic. Well, she's at Moore Memorial Hospital a few days a week and at the Clinic a few days a week."

"Not even a doctor yet and *already* hitting on nurses?" I teased.

Clarissa laughed softly, "I hadn't even thought about that! If things go well tomorrow night, I'll bring her to meet you sometime next week."

"And us sleeping together?"

"I don't fuck on the first date!" Clarissa said mirthfully. "But maybe on the second!"

"But once you do?"

"Let's worry about that when it happens, OK?"

"Sorry. I was being selfish."

"No, you were telling me exactly how much you love me. I didn't expect to meet someone this soon."

"And it's OK, Lissa."

"I almost feel like Jocelyn and I are both abandoning you."

"You aren't going anywhere," I said. "And we both knew that eventually this would end. As Jocelyn said, it's bittersweet. I'll be very happy if you find someone you want to be with, more so if you find that special girl who is worthy of your lifetime commitment."

"Thanks. I love you so much, Petrovich."

"And I love you, too, Lissa."

"You know that thing you used to do with Sophia? We could if you wanted to."

"No, Lissa," I said gently. "We're in a very good place right now. Let's keep things on the correct side of the line we both agreed to draw."

She snuggled back, "I love being in your arms. Going back to my point about Dona, she is interested. And I don't think she's looking for anything serious."

"You know my struggle right now. Let's see what happens with Jocelyn's date and your date and take it from there."

"OK."



June 8, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday morning, as I ran, I thought about the situation with Grace. I knew I had to give her an answer one way or the other about 'strip chess', and that would define our relationship for the Summer. I felt she'd be fun to hang around with either way, and she hadn't put any pressure on me at all since Tuesday night, which I appreciated. The question had become not about 'one more' but about whether or not being celibate for the Summer was the right thing to do.

What I hadn't factored in was both Jocelyn and Clarissa starting to date as quickly as they had, which meant I very likely wouldn't have anyone to sleep with. And THAT was actually weighing more on me than anything. I'd gotten used to having someone in my bed, and not just for sex, and I was going to miss

it. But was that sufficient reason to play 'strip chess' or see if Dona really was interested? And with that thought, I realized something else.

My true weakness, if it could be called that, was sleeping in the same bed with someone. I'd basically had a girl in my bed consistently for going on three years, and I realized THAT was my deepest need. To satisfy that need during my Senior year, that person would need to be a student because otherwise, Kelly Prager would have a field day. And even if she didn't, there was a limit to how far I could push the rules in the Fall, no matter how cool Michelle might be.

If Maggie and I were going to be a couple, I'd really have no choice but to move into Doctor Blahnik's house. The problem with that was that I'd have to make my decision before Lara came back to school because I couldn't, in good conscience, leave my RA position without giving the school sufficient time to replace me. I wondered if it made sense just to give up the RA position for Senior year. It would cost me some money, but I was far enough ahead of my budget that I could do that, and it would give me a tremendous amount of freedom.

But none of that answered my immediate question -- to play, or not play, 'strip chess' with Grace. I hadn't been able to fulfill my pool table fantasy, but this one I could, and I didn't think it would disappoint the way the threesome had, though, as I'd realized, that had led to my relationship with Milena, and that, I felt had been more than worth the price of brief disappointment.

I returned to my room, where Clarissa was still in bed. She got out of bed when I came into the room, putting her gorgeous body on display. I stripped off my running clothes, and we spent a couple of minutes just staring at each other before I got into the shower. Clarissa surprised me by squeezing in with me and wrapping her arms around me.

"One last shower together?" she asked. "I know it's a tight fit, but it can work."

"I believe I said that about you, too!" I teased.

Clarissa laughed, "Front or back?"

"All three!" I grinned.

It WAS a tight fit in the shower, and our bodies were pressed together, making it cumbersome to wash, but we managed. We finished, got out of the shower, dried each other, dressed, then headed to the cafeteria for breakfast. Jocelyn and Dona had decided that 6:15am was too early for breakfast, so they didn't join us. After we ate, Clarissa headed to Doctor Blahnik's house to wait until it was time for her to start work, and I headed to the Quick Mart.

"Morning!" Grace said when I let her in just before 7:00am.

"Morning! I noticed the beer wasn't restocked last night, so you'll need to do that first."

"Will do! Anything else?"

"What are you doing Tuesday evening?" I asked.

"Hopefully, playing 'strip chess' with you!"

I chuckled, "Let's meet for ice cream like we did last Tuesday and take it from there, OK?"

"Deal!"

The day went by quickly, with no issues, until 3:30pm, when two men in dark business suits and sunglasses walked into the Quick Mart. Their appearance screamed 'FBI', and I immediately guessed what it was about.

"Michael Loucks?" one of them asked.

"Yes."

He flashed an ID with a badge.

"Special Agents Thompson and Dodge, Air Force Office of Special Investigations. May we have a word with you?"

"Let me get someone to cover the register," I said.

He nodded, and I went to the stockroom and asked Grace to cover the registers. She asked what was going on, but I put her off, saying I wasn't sure.

"Is there someplace private we can talk?" Special Agent Thompson asked.

"The break room," I replied.

I walked to the back of the store and into the break room with the agents following close behind.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"We're investigating a missing person," Agent Thompson said. "Do you know the whereabouts of Margaret Nicole Schumacher?"

"She's not missing, Special Agent. She left home voluntarily, which you could confirm with the Harding County Sheriff's office."

"We've spoken to them, and they do not know where she is. Neither does her family."

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"That's because she doesn't want them to know where she is. Her dad basically had her under house arrest for the past year, and she left to escape that."

"You do know where she is?"

"I do, but she's sworn me to complete secrecy."

"Son, don't be foolish. We're federal agents investigating a missing person who is the daughter of a full Bird Colonel in the Air Force. Right now, we don't know if there is any foul play, but if you admit to knowing where she is and refuse to tell us, we can take you in for questioning and hold you for seventy-two hours while we continue our search."

"Colonel Schumacher confronted me about this and made threats if I didn't tell him where she was. I'd like to report him for making those threats, please."

"We'll consider that once we speak to Miss Schumacher. Until we speak with her, we have to consider you a suspect in her disappearance."

"She's at work right now. She's working for an attorney on 2nd Street."

"The address?"

"I believe it's 412 North 2nd."

"Thank you for your cooperation."

"And the complaint against the Colonel?"

He pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to me.

"Call this number, and they'll assist you."

"You won't take the complaint?"

"We're in the middle of an investigation."

And I was sure if I made the call, it was very likely I'd be ignored. I simply nodded, and they left the store. I went right to the phone, grabbed the phone book, looked up the number for the attorney's office, and called. The secretary put me through to Maggie, and I quickly explained what had happened.

"What do I do?" she asked nervously.

"Is the attorney there?"

"Yes."

"Tell him. Have HIM speak to the agents."

"But they'll tell my dad where I am!"

"Make sure the attorney tells them you do not want ANY contact. I'm going to call in a complaint about your dad threatening me; maybe that will help. Make sure the attorney knows your dad threatened me and that he basically had you under 'house arrest'. I'll meet you at the Elberts' house right after work."

"OK."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then dialed the number on the card. The person on the phone took down all the information and gave me a report

number, which I wrote down. Once I'd repeated the report number back, we ended the call.

"What the heck just happened?" Grace asked.

"The girl I'm seeing left home because her dad is a complete jerk. She didn't tell him where she was going, and he came to find me because her mom saw my car at their house. I refused to tell him where she was, he threatened me as you heard, and I guess he decided to file a missing-persons report even though the Harding County Sheriff's Department knows she left home voluntarily. That's why I'm guessing he sent the Air Force investigators -- the Sheriff probably told him they couldn't take the report because she left home voluntarily."

"This dude sounds like a major control freak!"

"Colonel, not Major," I smirked.

"Hah hah," Grace said flatly. "But if he was such a control freak, how did you date?"

"We haven't for most of the last year," I replied. "We managed to see each other secretly a few times, arranged by her friends, but he had her basically under guard twenty-four-by-seven."

"What a jerk! My parents are pretty strict, but they didn't even come close to anything like that, and so long as I didn't drink, do drugs, or get in trouble with the cops, they were reasonable. And I didn't do any of that stuff."

"And 'strip *Monopoly*'?" I asked with a grin.

"What they don't know can't hurt me!" she said with a silly smile.

"That's exactly what my friend Dale said back in High School. He STILL never managed to get in any real trouble! We can talk about this more tomorrow night. You need to get back to work."

Nancy came in on time, followed by Walt, and Grace and I left, each heading our own direction. I decided to walk to Maggie's house. I had plenty of time, so I didn't rush. Even so, I was early, so I sat on the steps to the front porch to wait. Maggie arrived about twenty minutes later.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi. That sucked."

"What happened?"

"They wanted to take me back to West Monroe, but Mr. Jacobs told them they'd have to arrest me if I didn't want to go. They tried to say you forced me to come to McKinley, but Mr. Jacobs told them he hired me before Christmas and that I had arranged for a place to live, too. He showed them the letter he had written to me but kept it so that my dad couldn't find it."

"Did he reveal Karl arranged the job for you?"

"No. He was really careful, but I was worried. Come inside, OK?"

I nodded, and after she unlocked the door, we went into the house and to her room.

"How did they leave it?" I asked.

"They were going to talk to my dad, I guess. Mr. Jacobs said there wasn't anything my dad could do. Did you file the complaint?"

"I did. And I have a report number. If he leaves you alone, I'll let it drop. If he doesn't, then I'll keep it active."

"Don't mess up his career, Mike."

"He's trying to mess up your life, and I don't want that to happen. And, to be honest, if you and I marry, he's going to be even MORE pissed, and I want to make sure he knows he can't interfere in our relationship. Do YOU want your dad to control our marriage?"

"No! Will you hug me, please?"

I held out my arms, and Maggie quickly stepped into them. I closed my arms around her, she put her head on my shoulder, and sighed deeply. I held her for about ten minutes before we left to have dinner. By the time we finished eating, Maggie was close to her normal self, and we decided to go to Milton Lake. We walked along the path to the spot we'd used to make out the last time we'd been to the lake. We sat down and spent thirty minutes necking before I walked her home.

I really wanted to talk to Clarissa, but I had no idea how late she'd be out with Abby, so I walked back to the dorm and went to my room, leaving the door open so Jocelyn would know I was awake when she came back from her date. I put on *Chicago 17* and took *Hit or Myth*, by Robert Asprin from my shelf. I'd started reading his 'Myth' series and found it absolutely hilarious. I read for about ten minutes before Dona came to the door.

"Hey," she said. "OK to come in?"

"If the door is open, it's always OK. Grab a soft drink from the fridge if you want."

She got a Sprite, then sat down on the couch.

"Do anything tonight?" I asked.

"Nope, unfortunately. Right now, it's just you, Clarissa, and Jocelyn I know, and the three of you all had dates."

"Sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for!"

"I just feel bad because you were basically left alone. Would you like to play mini golf tomorrow?"

"Just you and me?"

"As friends, if that's cool."

"Sure. What about Jocelyn and Clarissa?"

"I think they can manage for a few hours without me!" I chuckled.

"Then, sure. When?"

"How about 10:00am when they open? We'd leave here about 9:45am."

"Sounds good."

We hung out for about an hour, and I didn't see Jocelyn come in. Dona said 'good night', gave me a quick hug, and then went down the hall to her room. I did my evening prayers, brushed my teeth, used the bathroom, and then got into bed.



June 9, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I ran, showered, and met Jocelyn and Dona in the lounge so we could have breakfast; Clarissa met us in the cafeteria. As an employee, she could arrange a meal plan similar to the one students had but subsidized. It wasn't free like my RA plan, but it was very inexpensive for her. I wanted to talk to both Jocelyn and Clarissa about their dates but felt those conversations should be private, so I didn't ask during breakfast. When we finished, I told Dona I'd meet her at our planned time and asked Clarissa to take a walk with me.

"What's with that?" Clarissa asked.

"She was a bit bummed last night because the three of us had dates, so I asked her, as a friend, to play mini golf this morning."

"Interesting."

"Just friends, Lissa. I have enough complications. Maggie's dad sent some Air Force investigators to find her -- federal agents with badges and guns. I pretty much had no choice but to tell them where she was, or those guys would have arrested me as a suspect in her 'disappearance'."

"Seriously? I thought you dealt with the Sheriff and it was OK!"

"I thought so, too, but he filed some kind of missing person's report with the Air Force, and they sent two Special Agents to investigate. The lawyer Maggie works for told them to get lost and showed proof that she had the job arranged before Christmas. I doubt that's the end of it, though. Her dad isn't going to give up that easily."

"So now what?"

"I called that same Air Force agency and made a complaint against her dad for threatening me. I told Maggie I'd drop it if he left her alone, but if he didn't, then I'd go through with it. I really don't want to do that, but I don't know what choice I have."

"None, really, if you want to date her."

"Speaking of dates..."

"We had a good time, and I got a 'good night' hug," Clarissa said with a smile. "We're going out again next Friday. I told her what happened with Glenda and that I wanted to take things slowly, and she's cool with that."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-four. She grew up in the area, went to UC for nursing school, and then came back to McKinley to work at Moore Memorial Hospital. She works in internal medicine."

"What's her last name?" I asked.

"Normal," Clarissa smirked.

"Oh, it is NOT!" I replied, laughing hard.

"No. It's 'Norman,' but in nursing school, they called her 'Abby Normal!'"

"I think I'm going to like this girl! I'm curious, and I know I'm getting WAY ahead of myself, but are there rules about dating someone in the same unit?"

"I honestly have no idea, but it is something I'd need to check on if it ever got to that point, AND we were together five years from now. But that's getting WAY ahead! And speaking of 'way ahead,' did you hear from Lara?"

"I received a postcard in the mail yesterday from Miami, which she sent right before they boarded the ship. I expect to get the next one soon from their first port of call, which I think is Bermuda."

"I know you said 'just friends' about Dona, but if she's interested, she could solve your 'empty bed syndrome'."

I chuckled, "I don't think that's in the *DSM*!"

"Probably not. On another topic, did you come to a final conclusion about Grace?"

"I'm leaning towards taking the chance to fulfill that fantasy."

"Want to hear Doctor Clarissa's prescription?"

"Oh, sure; why not?"

"Play. It's something you've wanted to do since you were fifteen, and now you have a chance to do it. Neither Maggie nor Lara expects you to be chaste at this point, and we both know that sometime late this Summer, most likely in September, you're going to be engaged or pre-engaged at a minimum. I know you're worried about the number, and I'm not going to say something like 'one more is not a big deal', but all things considered, it makes sense."

"That was the general direction of my thinking."

"My other suggestion is to talk to Dona and see if she's interested in a short-term relationship. As weird as this sounds, it'll keep you balanced. I'm reasonably convinced that the source of your imbalance is a serious need for physical contact. I know I sound like an amateur psychologist, but I know you, Petrovich. When you have a regular partner, like Sandy or Kristin, you're much more mellow, and the 'flings' don't hold nearly the attraction they would otherwise."

"But you said she likes me, and that gives me a bit of pause. And the fact that she's a bit down and maybe even a bit lonely makes it potentially risky."

"Or, perhaps, you each meet a specific need the other person has for a time."

"You seem to be pushing me towards having sex," I said.

"This is different, and, honestly, I have to admit, in hindsight, it was a mistake to encourage you to have those flings."

"I made my own decisions, Lissa. I was perfectly capable of not having those flings, and, to be honest, Maggie encouraged me to be with Hannah, and Lara encouraged me to be with Sarah, each for their own reasons."

"Maggie wanted Hannah to be a placeholder," Clarissa said.

"Yes, somewhat like Angie did with Sandy, though Maggie would never have done that had she not been grounded. Call it 'desperate measures'. And as strange as it sounds, the events of the past year kind of back up her strategy. If Hannah and I had been seeing each other regularly, with her as a proxy for Maggie, Lara might never have happened. The problem was, I didn't feel comfortable with that because Hannah was Maggie's friend. Had I really understood what she was trying to do, which, by the way, Hannah told me later on, Maggie probably would be in the catbird seat right now."

"Instead of playing second fiddle to Lara?"

"It's not quite that clear cut," I replied. "Each of the girls has qualities I like. The main difference, at the moment, is that Lara seems much more at ease with what life will be like than Maggie does. But I asked Lara to think long and hard about it over the Summer, and Maggie is doing that as well."

"And Sarah got you as a reward for leaving the playing field open for Lara."

I chuckled, "The thing is, had it been an open competition, as it were, Sarah wouldn't have stood a chance. Lara didn't need to make that deal."

"I'll point out something very, very important about Lara, and it's why I think, in the end, she's the one."

"What's that?"

"She kept her word to her friend when it wasn't in her best interest to do so."

VI. London System

June 9, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I've figured out what's wrong with this game," Dona said after we'd played the first nine holes.

"What's that?"

"Using as few strokes as possible to get it in the hole!"

I guffawed.

"I mean, seriously, who wants FEWER strokes than average?" she continued.

I laughed harder.

"And who thinks that the best possible way to score is one stroke, then you take it out and move on to the next hole, never to put it in the first one again? GUYS! That's who!"

I doubled over at that point, one arm holding my side, the other using the putter for support. It took a couple of minutes before I could stand up, wipe the tears from my cheeks, and move towards the tenth hole. We talked as we played.

"Bad experience with men?" I asked with a grin.

Dona smiled wryly, "Yes and no. It's complicated."

"I'm a good listener, I mean, for a *guy!*"

"I think you'd have to be to have close friends like Clarissa and Jocelyn. Girls tend to glom on to guys who listen."

"And usually just want to be friends," I replied.

"I got the picture you don't have trouble getting dates."

"I did in High School," I replied. "I had one steady girlfriend, for most of Senior year, but otherwise, it never lasted beyond the second or third date. They always wanted to be friends, but that was it."

"Jocelyn?"

"My best friend from kindergarten through the middle of the Summer after Senior year. She was in a horrible accident, and in the aftermath, we successfully wrecked a thirteen-year friendship. It took two years to get it back, but it's not the same. I didn't meet Clarissa until I started at Taft, and you know she's lesbian."

"I met Steve near the beginning of my Sophomore year. We dated for a short time, then I made a really stupid decision and basically wrecked things. I dated some after that, and during my Junior year went with a guy for a while, but he was," she laughed, "like the golf game."

"Too few strokes?" I smirked.

"I described it as the difference between, uhm, screwing like a man and screwing like a little boy. He screwed like a little boy. Anyway, I ran into Steve again during my Junior year, and we reconnected, but we never really dated. At some point, he stopped coming back to Milford."

"You guys were never a couple?"

"No, but that was because I was stupid. Well, immature, foolish, and misguided. If I'd handled things differently, who knows? There was a girl he was interested in, but she was the 'Holy Roller' type, and let's just say I suspect I could offer things she would never even think about!"

I chuckled, "Kelly Prager?"

"But not stuck-up. She was WAY prettier than Kelly, and she was really sweet, not a bitch like Kelly. But even the school stud wasn't going to get THAT without a diamond ring, a white dress, and a reverend!"

"School stud?"

"I didn't know it when we met because Milford's Junior High has eighth and ninth grades, and he was two years ahead. He had a reputation with the girls in his grade and one lower, but I didn't have any friends in that same circle."

"So, a secret school stud?"

"From the rumors I eventually heard, all from girls, mind you, that was a perfect strategy. If he had less than two dozen girls from Milford, I'd be shocked. I only had a chance because the girl he'd been steady with moved to Seattle at the end of Junior year. He'd been in Sweden, but they'd still planned to be together, but I guess her dad got a job in Seattle, and they moved. He was a bit like you, too, in that he had lots of female friends, though the rumor was he slept with all of them, at least from time to time."

Which was true of me as well, but I didn't know how much Dona knew from Jocelyn and Clarissa. They'd both been careful talking around her, and Jocelyn

had made sure she went back to her room the mornings following those few nights we slept together before her first date with Bill.

"I've heard some stuff that sounds pretty far-fetched from a couple of people who knew him, but the stories all seem to match."

"I'd say he lived the dream life of an all-American High School guy," Dona observed.

"I, on the other hand, was the consummate nerd."

"I think that's almost a pre-req for being a doctor. My friend Larry at UC was a total nerd in High School as well. He still is, really. You seem to have escaped from the nerds."

"I met the right people at Taft," I replied.

"I'm glad I met you, Jocelyn, and Clarissa. It's made coming to Taft easier."

We finished the 18th hole and returned our clubs. I tallied the score sheet.

"I won by thirteen strokes," I said.

"A hundred and thirteen strokes would be a LOT better!"

"Have you counted?" I asked with a silly grin.

Dona laughed, "No. Somehow, I think counting strokes and writing it on a scoresheet might be a problem!"

"You never know; maybe it would encourage the guy to go as far over par as possible!"

"Now THERE'S an idea!"

We both laughed, and she looped her arm through mine. We made our way back to campus with our arms linked, and during our walk, we agreed to play mini golf again the following Saturday morning. When we arrived at the dorm, I took a few minutes to talk to Jocelyn in private.

"He asked for a second date, and I said 'yes'," she replied in response to my question about how things had gone.

"Good. Clarissa is going on a second date as well."

"And your mini golf game?"

"We had a lot of fun. I think I helped improve her mood, and I think she'll be a good friend."

"Cool. What's the plan for the rest of the day?"

"Karate, Vespers, then Chinese at Doctor Blahnik's house. Bring Dona, please; I don't want her to feel left out."

"Will do."



June 10, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"How are things at home, Tasha?" I asked when our group of four gathered in her apartment on Sunday afternoon.

"Mom said my dad sat in his study alone for a few hours after Father Nicholas called, but otherwise, he seems to be himself."

"Which means he's unhappy but isn't taking it out on anyone at your house."

"That's what I think, yes."

"Are Sasha's wedding plans set?"

"A week from Saturday, with special permission from the bishop. It'll be in the afternoon before Vespers, at Holy Transfiguration. The reception will be in the church hall right after the ceremony. That will end right before Vespers starts. Will you be able to be there?"

"When you gave me the tentative date, I made arrangements with Father Nicholas."

"The objections from Family Services were rejected?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes. According to my mom, who I called after church today, the judge said the law permitted the marriage, both parents had signed off, Sasha was willingly marrying Yaroslav, and he could support her."

"Could they appeal?" Jocelyn asked.

"I don't think so," Tasha said. "According to the attorney, the only time that can happen is if the two parents disagree. You only need one to sign in Ohio, so there could be a disagreement that the courts would have to settle. But Family Services can't appeal the ruling unless Sasha or my parents change their minds."

"Which is not going to happen," I said. "I'm glad that worked out OK. Did you talk with Nikolas?"

"I will on Wednesday," Tasha replied. "I decided to wait to make sure everything was fine at home, and my dad wasn't going to try to cause trouble."

"Unlike Maggie's dad," I replied. "He showed up at the house yesterday, and she simply refused to open the door. Nobody else was home, and she saw out the window who was ringing the bell, so she went to her room and closed the door and stayed there until he gave up."

"He didn't come to campus?" Jocelyn asked.

"Not that I'm aware of. He wouldn't have been able to get into the dorm, even wearing his uniform, and I didn't see him."

"Can he cause you any real trouble?" Tasha asked.

"Not really."

"And the complaint you made?" Jocelyn asked.

"Nothing has happened so far. I won't even bother following up unless he persists in harassing Maggie."

"Today is Pentecost," Clarissa said, "so you start fasting again, right?"

"Yes," I replied. "Wednesdays and Fridays. The next major fasting periods are the Apostles Fast, the Dormition Fast, and, of course, Little Lent, or the Nativity Fast. And then Great Lent and we do it all over again! I think I told you that the cycle of services basically defines time for me. It's not the days and months on the wall calendar but where we are in the church year. And after twenty-one years, that is the rhythm and flow of my life."

"Being Lutheran is SO much simpler," Jocelyn declared with a smile.

"And you know I feel Luther threw the baby out with the bathwater. His complaints about Rome were very similar to ours, and there were even dialogues between the Lutherans and Orthodox, but the Lutherans chose to go their own way with their own solutions to problems which had already been solved."

"Hey, I once told you 'Paris is worth a mass!'" Jocelyn protested.

"True," I agreed. "Let's change the topic! Tasha, what's for dinner?"

"Beef Stroganoff," she replied. "I should probably get started. Would you help?"

"Gladly!"



June 12, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Do you always get a single scoop of chocolate?" Grace asked on Tuesday evening when we were at Verner's.

"I know, boring in the extreme, but it's pretty much what I've done consistently since I was about ten, though I've been known to be wild and crazy and get a turtle sundae on occasion!"

Grace laughed softly, "Creature of habit?"

"Mostly, I guess. My church is very traditional, and it takes hundreds of years to change anything, and very few changes ever happen! New music for us means it's over a hundred years old! That's the thing that provides the foundation for my life. I think the easiest way to say it is that if it works, why change it?"

"An interesting point. Are you super-religious?"

"I'm faithfully Orthodox. But that's very different from what most people think is super-religious."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm faithful, conservative, and traditional, but not a fundamentalist."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"Do you know anything about the Orthodox church?"

"No."

"Then I think we should probably talk about something else because what you probably think a 'super-religious' person is actually has zero to do with what a faithful Orthodox Christian believes or does. There might be a few external similarities, but what I'd call our 'interior life' is very different because Orthodoxy is very different. And I strongly suspect you didn't come here for a theology discussion!"

Grace laughed, "Not even close. But where does that leave us?"

"Right now? We're two college kids having ice cream."

"And 'strip chess'?" she asked.

"Before I answer, when you asked all those relationship questions, you said it was for you. Why?"

"Just what I told you -- I'm not interested in anything serious, just someone to hang out with and have some fun. No complications, just two college kids hanging out and having a good time, with the added advantage that no matter what happens, my dad isn't going to send federal agents after you!"

"There is that," I chuckled. "One other important question. The game risks going beyond the prizes, so I have to ask about birth control, even if it doesn't get to that point."

"I use a diaphragm. I prefer to not take pills, don't like rubbers, and the diaphragm is really reliable."

I knew about diaphragms but had never been with a girl who used one. I remembered from health class that it had to be inserted before sex and that spermicide was used to provide additional protection, but that was the extent of my knowledge.

"I suppose the only question then is whether you're OK with the prizes. Your *Monopoly* game didn't have anything like that, did it?"

"It didn't. The whole point was the guys wanting to see us naked and needing some kind of gimmick! The first time, the game ended, and we put our clothes back on, and that was it. After Prom, well, the couples did what couples always do after Prom!"

Or tried to do, in my case, but I didn't think that was particularly relevant.

"And the prizes?"

"I don't see a problem with them. Neither of us are virgins, and it's just for fun, right?"

"Right."

"Your place or mine?" she asked.

"You live at home, right?"

"Yes, but my parents are out for the evening. They won't be home before 11:00pm, and I'm eighteen, so it's not like there's really much they can say or do if they came home early."

"Where do you live?"

"Just outside town to the north. I have my car, so probably the easiest is if we both drive. It's straight out of Main to Searle's Crossing. You make a left, then the first left, which is Ames, and it's the third house on the left. It's white, with red shutters. 412 Ames. You can park in the driveway behind my Challenger."

"One of the new ones, which are rebranded Japanese cars or a classic one?"

"It's my dad's old car -- a 1973 Challenger hardtop with a V8. You drive a Mustang, right?"

"Yes, a Black 1976 Cobra II with a V8 and a four-speed manual."

"Mine's a four-speed manual as well. Wanna trade cars for the drive?"

"Why not?"

We finished our ice cream, then walked back to campus so Grace could get my car, and then I walked back to Verner's to get into hers, which she had parked in the street in front of the shop. I started the engine and was treated to a full-throated roar from the V8. I laughed at the thought of what Jocelyn would do

with this car if she had the chance, but she had trouble driving stick due to how she'd healed after her accident.

Less than ten minutes later, I turned onto Ames and saw my Mustang idling by the curb. I pulled into the driveway of Grace's house, and she pulled in behind me. We both shut off the engines, got out, locked the cars, and exchanged keys.

"Nice car," I grinned.

"Same! Did you open her up?"

I shook my head, "My friend Jocelyn has the lead foot; I drive pretty conservatively. But I did test the power away from the line at the traffic light at Route 50. You?"

"I like to drive fast! Let's go in."

We went into the house, which was very similar to my parents' house, though it was a true two-story, whereas my parents' was a split-level. After we took off our shoes, Grace led me upstairs and to her room, which looked more like a guy's room -- posters of muscle cars, Pete Rose, Anthony Muñoz, and hilariously in contrast, at least to me, David Cassidy.

"*'One of these things doesn't belong here...'*," I sang.

"What? I can't have ONE thing that's girly? I had a crush on him to die for from ages ten to fourteen. I left it up because it contrasts with the other stuff."

I chuckled, "When we did the 'bachelorette' thing, and you said 'walks in the rain', I got a 'romantic' vibe."

"And that means I can't like Corvettes, baseball, and football?"

"No, it's just the contrast. I'm much more used to frilly rooms with at least some pink!"

"No pink decorations in here! I work on my own car, too; Dad taught me. You?"

I shook my head, "My friend Nate back home maintains my car for me. My dad always used a mechanic, so that's what I do."

"Working on cars is fun and a great way to meet guys. Let me get my chess set."

She went to the closet and got a rolled-up plastic mat and a box of chess pieces similar to what we used in tournaments. She waved, and I followed her back downstairs, then to the basement, where she unrolled the mat on a low table with beanbag chairs on each side. She opened the box, took out two pawns, put her hands behind her back, then held them out. I tapped her right hand and was rewarded with the white pawn.

We set up the pieces, and I decided on a fairly straightforward queen's pawn opening, with my choice of continuation influenced by Grace's response. She met my d4 with Nf6, and I elected to NOT play the Queen's Gambit, choosing instead Nf3. She met that with d5, and I responded with Bf4. This was the 'London System' and generally resulted in a closed, methodical game. It had the benefit of having fewer theoretical lines and was called 'boring' by our chess coach. But I was rusty, so it made sense to me to play it. It had the added benefit of giving me solid attacking chances while limiting Grace's chances at counter-attack. Grace responded with Bf5.

"London System?" she observed. "Very conservative."

"I figured a good choice, given I haven't played much in the last few years."

I played e3, and after a moment's thought, Grace played c6. I remembered playing this position in a tournament during my Junior year and how I'd messed up slightly. After the game, the coach had analyzed it for me, and I now made the move he'd suggested -- c4. Grace had to ensure her pawns were properly aligned, so she responded with e6. After Nc3 and Nbd7, I played Qb3, which meant I could force a series of profitable exchanges unless she moved her queen to a poor location, which she did by playing Qb6. The problem with that was I could chase her away with c5, which I did.

"I'd say nicely done," Grace said, "but I don't like how this is developing!"

She considered for a moment, then played Qxb3, taking my queen.

"Socks count as one item," I said, pulling off my grey tube socks.

"OK. I don't have a belt!" she protested.

"And I don't have a bra!" I countered, playing axb3, removing her queen from the board with my queen's rook's pawn.

Grace pulled off her white footies and wiggled her toes in the air.

"Sexy," I chuckled. "Your move!"

I liked my position, and with Grace's possible attacks defanged by the exchange of queens and my pieces more active, I felt confident. I just had to play accurately, and I'd be in good shape. The only question was how many pieces we'd exchange and whether or not we'd clear the pawns.

Grace made the correct technical reply of a6 because otherwise, I could push my pawns down the b-file and gain a serious advantage. It didn't prevent that, though, and I played b4 to press the attack. At worst, I'd have a superior tactical

advantage and might even gain a pawn or piece, depending on her play. Her a-file pawn was pinned, which would allow me to threaten it without risk of losing a pawn because then she'd be down a rook.

Grace had to clear the pin, so she played Rc8. One possible counterattack Grace could make was against my bishop, so I freed an escape route by playing h3. She responded with Be7, clearing the way to castle, king's side, and I played Nd2 so that I could prepare to threaten her pawn on the b-file, which she'd have serious trouble defending because my bishop threatened the eighth rank behind it. She castled.

I responded with g4, which gave me a serious space advantage on the king's side of the board, and basically bullied Grace into a series of moves that would give me an advantage. My idea of playing this system was panning out, and despite a mostly positional game so far, I felt I was way ahead. She had to retreat her threatened bishop with Bg6, and I prepared for my queen-side assault by playing Nb3. That forced Grace to protect her pawn by moving her rook back to its home square with Ra8. My next move, Na5, effectively deprived Grace of the use of her rook when she played Ra7, giving me a material advantage even though her piece was still on the board.

"You just HAD to elect a line that was positional," she said. "No pawns and no pieces off the board except the queens! Talk about slow-motion stripping!"

I chuckled, "I have you where I want you!"

I played f3, which effectively sealed off my king side from counterattack and solidified my positional advantage. Grace's pieces were cramped, while mine were free. She tried to shift the focus to the queen side with Rc8, but I countered by surrendering any chance of castling by playing Kd2 to solidify my queen-side defenses. Grace tried to force things with b6, but I saw a clear winning line in that I'd gain both material AND space.

I played Bxa6, taking the first pawn off the board and beginning what I was sure was the winning sequence.

"I believe you owe me a kiss," I said.

"Lean forward over the board," she replied.

I did, and we exchanged a soft kiss, which lasted just a few seconds. She leaned back, then played Rxa6.

"Now you owe ME one!" she declared.

I leaned forward, and we exchanged another soft kiss, though this one lasted twice as long.

I played Nxc6, gaining a pawn, which led to our third kiss, but this time, her lips parted, and we had a short-lived French kiss. When she leaned back, she played Rxc6, capturing my knight. I smirked and removed my belt, which caused Grace to roll her eyes. I captured her rook with Rxa6, then leaned back. Grace winked and pulled her T-shirt over her head, revealing a white lace bra encasing her modest breasts, along with a smooth, flat stomach and the tops of her nicely flared hips.

Grace had no choice but to retreat her rook, playing Rc8, allowing me to double my rooks on the a-file by playing Rha1. She captured my pawn with bxc5, and we exchanged a French kiss, which lasted about thirty seconds. Looking at the board, I saw that I could pin her rook against her king, and she had very little she could do to defend the position. I played Ra8. She could trade rooks, but that would leave her defenseless against my advancing queen-side pawns.

"Shit," she swore, and played Rf8.

That really didn't help her, as it allowed me to capture a pawn and un-double mine by playing bxc5. We exchanged another French kiss, then she leaned back to consider the position. She really had little chance but tried Nxc5, resulting in the capture of my pawn and an additional kiss. I elected to let the knight be for the moment and captured her rook with Rxf8, putting her in check.

"Check," I said with a grin.

Grace stood up and unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, pushing them down, revealing white lace panties which matched her bra. She kicked the jeans aside and sat back down. She elected to capture my rook with her king, and after she played Kxf8, I removed my T-shirt.

"Not bad," she said, licking her lips. "Nice muscle tone!"

"Karate," I replied, playing Ra8. "Check!"

Grace defended by interposing her knight with Ne8, allowing me to capture her other knight, which I'd chosen not to capture earlier. That meant she'd have to remove her bra.

"I'd say this is a foregone conclusion at this point," she said.

"Oh, one other thing, you can't resign to avoid taking off your clothes! Draws are OK, though."

"Is that an offer?"

"Are you high?" I chuckled.

She laughed, reached around, unhooked her bra, pushed the straps from her shoulders, and tossed it aside. She had very nice, full breasts capped with large pink areolae and eraser-size nipples. I nodded my approval, and she rolled her eyes and shook her head. She played Bxc5, capturing my pawn, which led to another French kiss across the board and a sequence of moves allowing me to develop my position -- Rc8, to which she responded Be7. I pushed my pawn forward with e4, resulting in an exchange of pawns after dxe4 and Nxe4 and two more French kisses.

I now had all her pieces and pawns cornered around her castled king, and it was simply a matter of applying pressure. After she played f6, I pressed my attack with Bd6, which put her in a terrible position, as she couldn't make an even exchange because her knight was pinned. Not that it really mattered, as she was already down a rook for a bishop and couldn't prevent me from winning. She played one of her few legal moves, f5, which let me play Bxe7, capturing her bishop.

"Check," I smirked.

Grace stood up and quickly stripped off her panties, revealing a neatly trimmed patch of black pubic hair and full, thick labia. She laughed, did a quick pirouette, then sat back down.

"Can I resign now?" she asked.

"You can," I said.

"You're going to have to strip to claim your prize, so it seems silly to finish the game!"

She toppled her king, then stood up. I stood up and unbuttoned my jeans, pushed them down, stepped out of them, and then stripped off my briefs,

allowing the erection I'd been sporting since Grace removed her panties to spring free.

"Well, well, well," Grace said. "I hope you can wield that thing as impressively as it looks!"

"I've never had any complaints," I replied.

She moved around the low table and stood right in front of me. I put my arms around her and pulled her to me, and we exchanged a searing French kiss, one with a much more clearly defined purpose than those across the chess board. I ran my hands over Grace's back and butt and enjoyed the soft skin and firm muscles, as well as the press of her breasts into my chest and the soft tickle of her pubic hair on my shaft.

Grace broke the kiss after a minute and nudged me down into the beanbag chair. She knelt in front of me, grasped my shaft, opened her mouth, and slowly took me in, sucking and licking. I leaned back, closed my eyes, and enjoyed the warm wetness as Grace bobbed her head slowly, stroking me with her hand and sliding her tongue around my glans and shaft. The blowjob was exquisite, and she took her time, obviously intending to make it last. I simply relaxed and let her pleasure me.

After a time, she moved her free hand to my sack and gently cupped my balls, applying just the slightest pressure as she began to bob and stroke faster. I felt my orgasm build, and I twitched a couple of times before I groaned and fired the first jet of cum into Grace's mouth. She responded by stroking me faster and lashing my glans with her tongue, which intensified the pleasure. I groaned a second time as she sucked and licked and stroked and was rewarded by several more spurts of cum. When my orgasm finally passed, Grace licked and sucked for another minute before releasing me. I pulled her up on top of me, and we exchanged a furious French kiss.

"Did that meet the prize standards," she asked with a smirk.

"If that kiss didn't answer the question, I'm not sure what would!"

Grace laughed, "A man confident enough in his own sexuality to kiss me after he came in my mouth is VERY sexy!"

"Thanks."

"Do we have to play again for me to get a prize, or can we just skip to the end?"

"You're assuming you'd win," I chuckled. "What if I won?"

"Then you'd get another blowjob!"

"Hmm..." I grinned.

Grace laughed, "Men! Beer, baseball, and blowjobs!"

"There are alternative sayings," I chuckled.

"Food, football, and fucking?" she asked with a silly smile.

"That's the one I was thinking of."

"So, do we play again, or not waste the next thirty minutes playing chess when we can do something WAY more interesting?"

"I thought the chess game was VERY interesting!"

"Yes, but now that you've seen it, it's sort of anti-climactic to put our clothes back on and play!"

"True," I grinned. "Especially when you're lying naked on top of me! If we're going to do what I think we're going to do..."

"It's already in," Grace smirked. "I put it in right before I left to meet you at Verner's. Just in case."

"Just in case what?" I grinned.

"That you suck my nipples, lick my pussy, and show me that you know how to use that gorgeous thing between your legs!"

"I thought I'd use it between YOUR legs," I teased.

"Tongue first!"

We shifted positions so that Grace was reclined in the beanbag chair, and after exchanging a French kiss, I slid down so that I could feast on her breasts, one after the other, then kissed my way down to her mons, took a deep breath through my nose to enjoy her intoxicating scent, then lowered my mouth to her labia. She tasted coppery, with a hint of spice, and I lapped up her juices as I pleased her to three strong orgasms before kneeling in front of her, placing my glans against her sopping-wet labia and slowly pushing my full length into her silky tunnel.

"Ahhh," Grace sighed. "Yeah...so deep!"

She spread her legs as wide as she could, I put my hands on the floor next to the beanbag and began thrusting, making sure I got my entire length into her on

each thrust. Grace rocked her hips back to give me even better access and groaned loudly when I began thrusting hard and fast.

"Just...like...that..." she gasped.

A minute later, she groaned deeply as her internal muscles contracted around my shaft. That happened twice more before I was right at the edge of the precipice. I focused on bringing Grace to a fourth orgasm before I could no longer hold back. I pushed deeply into her and came hard as her muscles milked cum from me. Grace put her legs around the small of my back and ground against me, prolonging her own orgasm. We stayed coupled together until our breathing returned to some semblance of normal.

"What do you say," she asked. "A regular Tuesday chess game for the rest of the Summer?"

"I think that's a great idea!"

"We have time for another round, if you want."

There was no chance I was going to turn down that offer. None at all.



June 13, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"My dad is royally pissed," Maggie said when I picked her up for Vespers on Wednesday.

"I don't think that's news," I replied.

"Karl called me and said my dad had been called into the Base Commander's office because of your complaint."

"How much trouble is he in?"

"I guess it depends on what you say to the investigators. Somebody is supposed to contact you tomorrow."

"When I take you home after Vespers, call your brother and tell him that I'll drop the complaint if your dad agrees to leave you alone permanently."

"That might not work, according to Karl. To be sure that happened, you'd have to say you lied, and then they could charge you with making a false report."

"What if I just say I decided to withdraw the complaint?"

"You could, but the Base Commander could still take action because they have the complaint."

"Is there ANY way around this?"

"Karl suggested you tell the investigators that now that you've had more time to think about it, you think you overreacted to him saying he'd hold you responsible for anything which happened to me. You know, you realize he was being overprotective. That will send the message that you won't provide any support if there's any kind of hearing or if my dad were to challenge any ruling by the base commander."

"I'll do that, but you know my condition. A promise from your dad as a military officer that he'll leave you alone. And you offer a small concession."

"What's that?"

"That you'll call or visit them from time to time and call to let them know you're OK."

"But isn't that giving him what he wants?"

"Is it? Is calling your mom to say you're fine and enjoying living here and that you like your job letting them control you? Or going to visit on their birthdays or Thanksgiving or Christmas? I think a peace offering on our part is warranted here, and it'll help defuse the situation. It won't go away because they'll be upset about you converting, but maybe it smoothes things out just a bit."

"You sound like Karl," she said. "He didn't say exactly that, but he did say I should find a way to at least talk to my mom."

"If I may make a comparison, Liz's life got a lot better when she started listening to my advice. She didn't always take it, and that's fine, but she did take it often enough to see that I was actually looking out for her best interest."

"How is she doing?"

"I talked to her after work today. She's doing just fine. She's happy to be out of the house and likes her job. She'll start junior college in the Fall semester. The other thing I was going to ask was about you seeing your friends."

"This Saturday. Hannah, Violet, and Valerie are coming here to hang out for the day. They'll go home when you pick me up for Vespers."

"Cool."

After Vespers, I took Maggie back to the Elberts' house and went inside with her so she could call Karl. She got hold of him and told him what we'd discussed. He

told her he'd call their dad and talk to him, then call back. She asked me to wait, and when I agreed, we went to her room and cuddled, leaning against the bed.

"I've been thinking about all the stuff you said," Maggie said after a few minutes of silence. "It seems like it's this ridiculous challenge for both of us."

"The bar for being a doctor does have to be set pretty high," I replied. "I can quibble with the thirty-six-hour shifts, but otherwise, I think I'd want my doctors thoroughly trained. And the challenges of training and the stress of the job create all kinds of potential relationship problems."

"I read that doctors have a divorce rate that's like double regular people, and they're much more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol and have a high suicide rate."

"That's all true," I confirmed, "and that's why I'm looking for a partner who can help keep me from falling into any of those traps or others like inappropriate relationships."

"Cheating?" Maggie asked.

"That appears to be a major issue as well."

"'Team Maggie' does NOT allow trades, substitutes, pinch hitters, or replacements!"

I chuckled, "I wouldn't have thought otherwise. But I didn't list that one because I honestly don't see that as a real risk for me. I'm confident that I can be faithful to my promise."

"Then why say divorce?"

"It wouldn't be me initiating it," I replied gently.

"And you think I would?"

"It's that risk that caused me to be blunt about what life will be like for the next six or seven years. This really is a 'count the cost before building the tower' situation. I have. Now you have to."

"And you're sure I'll make you happy?"

"That's what we're working to find out," I replied. "Well, one of the things. And I'm talking emotionally. The physical part, well, pretty girls with red hair, green eyes, and sexy bodies are pretty much the sweet spot!"

Maggie laughed, "You haven't even seen me in a bathing suit!"

"I have a very good imagination! I'm guessing freckles and that red is your natural color!"

Maggie laughed, "VERY! That's actually redder than my other hair! And yes, freckles on my shoulders and chest."

"Maybe I'll reconsider," I grinned.

She swatted my arm lightly, "You're the one who told me 'no!'"

"Actually, I believe I said 'not yet!' And I still think that's the best strategy at the moment."

"You're afraid I'll be upset if we do, and then we don't get married?"

"Given what you've said, yes. Don't rush, Maggie. There's no need."

She was about to answer when the phone rang. She hopped up and headed to the kitchen. I waited to give her some privacy, and she was back a few minutes later.

"Karl said I should call home and talk to my mom and offer to visit on Sunday. I can skip church, but I know you can't, and I don't have a car."

"You drive stick, so you could take my car, and I could ride to church with Tasha."

"Are you sure?"

"I'd rather you not have your mom or dad pick you up because that would leave you stranded if things go badly."

"Maybe I'll ask Hannah, and she can come get me, then go to my house with me."

"If that works better for you, sure."

"Let me go make the call."

She was gone about ten minutes before she came back.

"I talked to my mom, then Hannah. I'll go home with Hannah on Saturday and she'll bring me back Sunday. I'll miss church this weekend, but I think you and Karl are right. Will you tell the investigators it's not a concern?"

"Yes, of course."

"Can we make out for a bit before you go back to the dorms?"

"Absolutely!"

VII. A Change of Plans

June 16, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"So that's it?" Clarissa asked when I hung up the phone on Saturday morning.

"Yes. After I talked to the investigators on Thursday morning, they closed the investigation, and late yesterday, the Base Commander told Maggie's dad he wasn't going to take any action. According to what Karl said, the Base Commander gave Maggie's dad an unofficial reprimand about what he said to me, but that won't have any negative effect on his career."

"And Maggie is going to see her parents tonight?"

"Tomorrow. She's staying at Hannah's tonight, and then Hannah will go with her tomorrow, then bring her home tomorrow evening."

"That seems to have worked out well, but does it matter?"

I shrugged, "I haven't made any firm decisions either way. The point you made about Lara keeping her word did shift the needle a bit, but Maggie has her own set of qualities. And what's interesting is that hers are very different from Lara's, but in the end, either one would very likely meet my needs."

"Red hair and green eyes trump being Russian?"

"Those are attractive qualities, but you know it's way more than that. If I were going purely on beauty, Tasha would have won hands down, but you know what happened there."

"Her needs and your needs don't line up in a way where both could be satisfied. And that's the real question for both Lara and Maggie -- do their needs and your needs line up in a way where both are met."

"Exactly."

"How do you feel?"

"I'm comfortable with the situation. The real drama will come if both girls believe they can have their needs met, and I believe both can meet my needs. At that point, I'll have a difficult decision to make, and someone is going to be hurt by the choice I make. That does not make me happy. And honestly, I lay this problem directly at the feet of Maggie's dad because he delayed us for a year! If he hadn't, this dilemma wouldn't even exist."

"Are you sure?"

"If Maggie and I had been steady, I wouldn't have been receptive to Lara's advances, and she wouldn't have pressed the matter. Remember, she waited until she was sure I wasn't involved with Kimiko before she made her move."

"True."

I checked my watch and saw it was time to leave.

"I need to leave for my Saturday mini-golf game with Dona."

"So that's a regular thing now, along with your Tuesday chess match with Grace?"

"At least for the Summer, yes. Are you coming to church tonight or hanging out with Jocelyn?"

"We're double-dating -- her and Bill and me and Abby."

"Cool. I want to meet them!"

"How about a triple-date next Friday? You know, like you used to do with Jocelyn and Dale?"

"Sounds like a winner!"

We hugged, and I headed back to campus to meet Dona. I knocked on her door and she opened it, we said 'goodbye' to Jocelyn, and then headed to the mini golf course.

"You can stroke your ball first," Dona teased.

"It's even blue," I chuckled.

"Which happens if you don't take enough strokes to finish!"

"Not to mention a disappointed partner!"

We had a fun round, bantering the whole way. When we finished, I added up the scores.

"58 for me," I grinned, "and 69 for you! I hope you enjoyed it!"

"My first 69 ever!"

"Mini golf? Or...?"

"Either. I wasn't very adventurous."

"And now?" I asked.

"A girl has to have some secrets!"

We began walking back towards campus.

"Same time next Saturday?" she asked.

"Absolutely. I've had a really good time these last two Saturdays."

"I appreciate you spending time with me."

"I don't have any specific plans for the afternoon if you want to do something together."

"Sure," Dona replied. "Anything."

I chuckled, "After all that banter, that statement could be dangerous!"

"That banter tells me that you and I both know that, at some point, we're going to end up in bed together. It's just a question of when. Or did I just totally step in it?"

"Well, that cut right to the chase! And yes, I got that idea from the banter as well."

"Then, if you're game, I can have my first 69!"

"Birth control?"

"I take it you have rubbers?"

"I do. I have a proposition for you?"

"Didn't I just proposition YOU?"

I chuckled, "Yes, you did. If you're satisfied after this afternoon, you're welcome to sleep with me as much as you want during the Summer."

"And what happens at the end of August? You turn into a pumpkin?"

"Maybe we should talk before we fool around. In fact, I know we should."

"Why does this sound like a kiss-off?" Dona sighed. "Did you just change your mind?"

"You kind of walked into the middle of the play," I replied. "Did Jocelyn say anything about my plans?"

"No. Well, about you wanting to be a doctor but nothing else."

"I'm a candidate for ordination, and in our church, you have to marry before you're ordained. That's probably a little over a year from now, and the girl has to be Orthodox. Sometime this Fall, I'm likely going to get betrothed, which is similar to being engaged. That means at the end of the Summer, I need to make some decisions."

"Engaged? But you aren't even steady with anyone!"

"It's not going to be like that," I said. "This will be closer to an arranged marriage, except the girls and I are doing the arranging instead of a matchmaker. Until the end of the Summer, I'm more or less a free agent."

"So what you're saying is you can't be my boyfriend."

"You knew I was dating."

"Sure. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to imply you were leading me on. I didn't ask you for any promises before offering to fool around, but what you're saying is, basically, we can fuck ourselves silly, but once the Summer session ends, that's it? Just friends again?"

"That would pretty much be it unless you had some burning desire to become religious."

"Not a chance! I haven't set foot in a church except for a funeral or wedding in my entire life."

"Do me a favor, please."

"What's that?"

"Think about it, and we'll just hang out with Clarissa and Jocelyn this afternoon. If you decide that what I can offer meets your needs, then stay tonight. If not, we'll play mini golf next Saturday, and no harm, no foul."

"Can I ask one question?"

"Sure."

"Do you fuck as well as you tease?"

"Reportedly so," I replied.

"And the equipment?"

"That's two questions," I replied. "And after all, a guy has to have some secrets!"

She laughed and squeezed my arm, giving me a strong indication that her answer would be 'yes'.

Late in the afternoon, I walked to the Quick Mart so that Tasha and I could ride to church together. As usual, she gave me her keys, and I drove her Volvo out of town towards the church.

"I should have asked before," Tasha said, "but do you mind if I talk with Nikolas after the service? It'll most likely only be about fifteen minutes."

"If it takes you that long to snare him, you've lost your touch!" I teased.

"Very funny! I'm going to do this in a proper way."

"I wouldn't ever doubt that," I replied. "But you are very beautiful which makes you very hard to resist!"

"Thank you! And you know very well that the next man who makes love to me will be my husband on my wedding night! You were a very special case."

"And very privileged," I replied.

"Are we meeting Clarissa and Jocelyn for dinner?"

"No. They're on dates tonight. We can have dinner together if you like."

"It would need to be someplace public for appearances."

"Yes, of course. We can eat at the Chinese place."

"Good!"

We arrived at church, I got my cassock from the back seat where I'd stashed it, put it on, and we went into the church. Just over an hour later, after the service finished, I went to sit on a bench outside the front door of the church to wait for Tasha.

"Subdeacon?"

I turned to see Elizaveta Kozlova.

"Hi, Elizaveta," I said. "How are you?"

"Good. May I sit?"

"Of course."

She sat down on the bench, about six inches away from me.

"May I ask a question?"

"Sure," I replied.

"Is there something wrong with the girls here at Saint Michael?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"Because you're always bringing different girls to church with you. First it was Angie, then Clarissa, then the Japanese girl, and then another girl, and now the girl with red hair. And you and Tasha are not a couple, which everyone thought you were, at least at one point."

I was sure she meant Maggie, with the comment about red hair, and the other one had to be Lara. Elizaveta had a good point, but it wasn't that anything was wrong; it was just timing and circumstances, as well as age, at least for some of the girls like Elizaveta.

"No, there's nothing wrong with you and your friends," I replied.

"Then why not ask one of us out? Yuliana, Oksana, or I would love to have you ask us out."

"You and Oksana are a bit young," I replied.

"We're not little girls, Subdeacon!" she declared fiercely. "And we're faithfully Orthodox, understand what it would mean to be a deacon's wife, and like the idea of being a doctor's wife."

"Is that a proposal?" I asked lightly, with a smile to show I was teasing.

Elizaveta laughed, "Perhaps it is! But I would have expected you to at least ask Yuliana on a date because she's a Senior now. I'd prefer you to ask me, obviously. But I think you don't think any of us are interesting."

"I suppose you could just chalk it up to the randomness of life. I did date Katy Malenkov before she went to college in California, and I dated Janey from Holy Transfiguration for a bit. I met these other girls in a way that kind of led me from one to the next."

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Very," I replied truthfully, for she was very pretty.

"And you think I'm nice?"

"You're very sweet," I replied.

"I think you're handsome and very nice, and I think I could make you very happy if you gave me a chance to try."

"You're going to be a Sophomore, right?"

"Yes."

"You're six years younger than I am," I replied gently. "That wouldn't be a big deal if you were, say, nineteen and I was twenty-five, but now?"

"And when you're seventy, I would be sixty-four! I know how to cook, bake, clean, do laundry, sew, care for babies, and I am quite sure I can figure out how to make them!"

I laughed, "I think everyone can figure that one out, even without health class."

"I do know how it works!" she giggled. "I was being silly. But even so, I have all the qualities of a good wife, don't you think?"

"Those are indeed very good skills, but the true qualities of a good wife are faithfulness and supporting her husband, just as the true qualities of a good husband are faithfulness and supporting his wife. The division of labor isn't important to me."

"And Doctor Michael Loucks, Deacon of the Church, will have free time to cook, clean, do laundry, and all those other things? Or will he need a faithful Orthodox wife who is skilled in those things and who is willing to do them?"

"A reasonable point," I said with a smile.

"My parents like you, which is important as well."

"That does help, but it's not a requirement."

"But you agree it's better if they do, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"And did you know our house has a cottage which would be perfect for a medical student and his wife to live in? And it would even be sufficient for a baby if they had one?"

"I didn't know that," I said, laughing softly. "How much time did you spend planning your argument?"

She laughed, "None! I mean, obviously, I've thought about it, or I wouldn't be talking to you, but I didn't write everything down or discuss it with anyone. Will you promise me one thing?"

"What's that?"

"You'll consider what I've said? Honestly?"

I smiled, "Yes, I will."

"Would you do something else?"

"What's that?"

"Take off your cassock so I can kiss your cheek?"

I nodded, stood up, removed my cassock, and then sat down. Elizaveta leaned over, kissed my cheek, then stood.

"See you tomorrow, Subdeacon!" she said.

"See you tomorrow."

She went back into the church, and I shook my head. I folded my cassock and waited for Tasha, who came out of the church about five minutes later. We walked to her car, and I got into the driver's seat after holding the passenger door for her.

"Did you put Elizaveta up to that?" I asked.

"Up to what?" Tasha asked.

"A full-court press, or maybe an all-out frontal assault!"

"What did I miss?"

"I came outside to sit on the bench as I told you I was going to do. She came out and spent nearly ten minutes giving me all the reasons I should ask her out, or really, why I should propose to her immediately."

"Mischa," Tasha said with a soft laugh, "Maggie wasn't here, so Elizaveta, recognizing the opportunity, decided to take the bull by the horns! She's been waiting for you to talk to her, or at least one of her friends, for ages. And I don't mean just the small talk at lunch after Liturgy."

"She basically complained that I was bringing outside girls to church and ignoring her, Oksana, and Yuliana. She said she had expected me to ask Yuliana out because she was older, but when I didn't, she decided to talk to me."

"And did she make a good argument? I mean, besides being a pretty, dark-haired Russian girl?"

"She did, for every practical issue."

"Which, I shouldn't have to remind you, is what matters in your mind!"

"You don't have to remind me," I said.

"I think the other girls all gave up, though I don't know for sure. Elizaveta appears to have decided to take matters into her own hands."

"And you had nothing to do with it?" I asked.

"No. Remember, I said she was the best choice for you, even though she's still young. But she'll be sixteen by next Summer."

"I still find that problematic."

"And when you are eighty and she's seventy-four?"

I chuckled, "She said seventy and sixty-four."

"I would say, unless you have absolutely decided on Larisa Sergeyevna, you should ask Elizaveta's father for permission to court her, the same as you did with my father when you and I started seeing each other."

"And what do I tell Maggie?"

"The truth, Mischa. I believe in any comparison she comes second. That's true of Lara, Elizaveta, Yuliana, or Oksana. I didn't suggest those girls' names lightly!"

"No, I'm sure you didn't. But I like Maggie."

"Yes, of course. I think she would make a fine girlfriend, but I don't think she's the one to be your partner as a doctor and a deacon. And Mischa, you should tell her before she's received into the church."

"You think she's doing this just for me?"

"I think it's possible, though not like your Japanese friend."

Our conversation continued at the Chinese restaurant after we placed our order.

"I believe Clarissa agrees with me about Maggie," Tasha said. "Doesn't she feel Lara is the obvious choice?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure I agree."

"I think you do, but you feel obligated to give Maggie a chance, to the point where you might be fooling yourself about how you actually feel."

"«Дерьмо» (*dermo*)," I sighed. ("damn")

"So you agree that might be the case? That you are trying so hard to keep your word that you've talked yourself into something that might not be in your own best interest?"

"Maybe. But it's going to hurt her badly if I tell her that."

"But which is worse? Now? Or later? Especially if you two become lovers."

"I've purposefully avoided that."

"To avoid hurting her even more, right?" Tasha asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Talk with Jocelyn and Clarissa and tell them what happened and what I said. See if they agree with me. If they do, it will confirm what you know to be true in your heart. Now, let's eat and talk about other things."

We had a nice meal, but I was distracted by the events of the evening, and I was sure Tasha noticed. When we finished eating, I drove us back to the Quick Mart and parked in Tasha's reserved spot. I walked her to her door, we exchanged a chaste hug, and I headed back towards the dorm. I remembered my conversation earlier with Dona and wasn't sure being with her was a good idea, so I continued past the campus and headed for Doctor Blahnik's house.

I let myself in and found the house completely dark. I turned on the light for the stairs and went up to my room. I shut the door and leaned against it in the darkened room. After a few minutes, I felt my way to the bed and turned on the dim lamp on the nightstand. I used the pale light to turn on the radio, then decided to soak in the tub. I went into the bathroom, opened the taps, closed the drain, undressed, and got into the tub.

As the water rose around me, I contemplated my conversation with Tasha. I couldn't dispute her logic any more than I could dispute Elizaveta's logic, though at least with Elizaveta, a simple 'no' wouldn't be devastating. I did find it interesting that she'd decided to take matters into her own hands, as it were, and make her case clearly and succinctly. And while there was no way I was going to say it to her, she was only about eighteen months younger than Lara. And if I

were to seriously consider her, I would likely have to postpone my ordination, which was not out of the question but also not what I wanted to do if I could help it.

The situation with Maggie was complicated by a nagging feeling that I was her escape from her controlling parents. While that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, if that was the *main* reason, then there was a chance I was setting myself up for the exact kind of disaster I wanted to avoid at all costs. Lara certainly wasn't in that kind of situation, being emancipated and having a good relationship with both sets of parents. Elizaveta had inadvertently made clear she wasn't trying to escape by suggesting we could live with her parents, albeit in a separate cottage on their property.

When the tub was filled, I turned off the taps and simply relaxed in the very warm water, trying not to think too much about the situation. I would talk with Jocelyn and Clarissa, but for now, I needed to clear my mind and relax. The warm water did wonders, though the sauna at Katy's house had been more effective, though most of the time we'd been in there we'd created heat of our own to add to the steam.

My relaxation was interrupted by a knock at the door, and assuming it was Clarissa I called out for her to come in. I was wrong, of course, and nearly had a heart attack when Doctor Blahnik came into the bathroom. I quickly moved my hands to cover my groin.

"I, uhm, thought you were Clarissa," I stammered.

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "I certainly didn't expect to find you sitting naked in the tub! If I had, I'd have brought a bottle of wine with me!"

"Er, uhm" I stammered, tripping over my own words. "I, uhm, sorry, you have me completely flustered!"

"Who? Me?" she teased.

I took a couple of deep breaths and let them out, trying to regain my composure and banish thoughts of a naked Anicka Blahnik in the tub with me, sipping wine.

"I'm a student, and you're faculty," I finally said, sure that it sounded like a lame excuse.

"A true statement," she replied with a twinkle in her eye. "What is it that's bothering you that has you here alone, soaking in the tub?"

"A conversation with Tasha about a girl I'm seeing."

"Milena tried to explain your relationships, and I have to say I got lost somewhere along the way. You and Tasha seemed to get along VERY well."

"That kind of 'getting along' is necessary but not sufficient."

"So what's the problem?"

"A series of events that messed up a potential relationship, and I think I fooled myself about it because I was trying to keep my word. Events since then have kind of upended my plans, and I think, in the end, I have to tell this other girl I'm not interested."

"If that's true, you want to do it sooner rather than later. Don't string her along, Mike."

"Which is why I'm sitting here trying to make sure I have my head on straight!"

"I'll leave you alone, then, but Mike?"

"Yes?"

"When you graduate, if you want to share a bottle of wine, let me know."

She left before I could respond. I could just see Sandy's face if she knew about the very direct offer Doctor Blahnik had just made. I also knew that the image of Anicka naked, in my arms, sipping wine, that had popped into my mind was burned in forever. I soaked for another fifteen minutes, then opened the drain, got out, dried off, and dressed. I went downstairs, said 'goodbye' to Doctor Blahnik, then headed back to campus.

I arrived on the second floor to a screaming match between Kelly Prager and a girl named Marissa, whom I knew slightly. Several other students, including Dona, were there as well. I walked over to Kelly and Marissa.

"Let's take this somewhere private, please," I said.

"Butt out!" Kelly demanded.

"No," I replied firmly. "You're having a screaming match in the lounge, and one of the things we're required to do, *by the rules*, is mediate disputes. I'm mediating. My room. Now!"

Marissa followed me to my room, but Kelly stood with her arms crossed, not moving.

"Kelly, if you don't allow me to mediate, I'll report the situation to Dean Anderson. That said, if you accept mediation and don't want me to mediate, we can get the RAs from the first floor."

"Fine!" she spat.

I had them sit on opposite ends of one couch, then sat down on the other couch facing them.

"Marissa, what's the problem?" I asked.

"Hey!" Kelly interrupted. "I'm the RA!"

"Yes," I replied gently, "which is why you shouldn't have been screaming. You'll have your turn. Marissa?"

"She's jealous because I went on a date with Ray Booth last night. She saw him come out of my room this morning and lost it. I just took off to avoid the argument, but the minute I came back, she was on me like flies on manure."

"Ray Booth?" I asked.

"A guy on the first floor. She thinks she owns him, but he's not interested in a bitch like her!"

"Let's not make personal attacks, please," I requested, despite agreeing with her.

"Kelly?"

"She stole my boyfriend by being a skank!" Kelly declared viciously.

"No personal attacks," I repeated.

"It's true, though!" Kelly persisted. "Ray and I were going out, she slept with him, and he broke up with me."

"He told me he broke up with you BEFORE he spent the night with me!" Marissa said. "That was two days ago, and you only believed him when you saw him come out of my room!"

I was WAY out of my league on this one, but I had to at least get them to not kill each other before I could get a female RA or someone in Student Services to mediate. I immediately realized I was kidding myself because no amount of mediation was going to solve THIS problem. Kelly was just going to have to deal with it.

"Kelly, I'm not sure there's a solution here except for you to accept that Ray wants to be with Marissa. Nobody here can make him get back together with you, if that's what you want. If he wants to date Marissa, that's his business."

"Because guys stick together to make sure they protect the sluts who put out!"

"I said no personal attacks!" I declared firmly. "As RA, I'm telling you both to stay away from each other. And Kelly, no reports of 'smelling pot' or any other kind of harassment. If you do, I'll report you for retaliation and do so fast it will make your head spin."

She glared at me, got up, and stalked out of the room.

"Thanks," Marissa said.

I shrugged, "I'm not sure it'll do any good. I'm just trying to figure out how she's avoided problems in the past."

"She was really tight with Dean Parker, who backed her on everything. I'm sure you know she was one of the RAs who opposed the rule changes. I think you can guess why."

"If there is anything which interests me less than Kelly Prager's sex life, I'm not sure what it would be!"

"WHAT sex life? She's the most stuck-up, prudish, frigid chick I've met in my life. I mean, I know some committed virgins, but they aren't out to stop EVERYONE from having sex; she is!"

"May I suggest Ray's room in the future?"

Marissa laughed, "That's probably the best plan. Thanks, Mike."

"Let me know if she causes you ANY trouble at all."

"I will."

She left, and Dona came to the door, and I waved her in.

"That was entertaining," Dona said. "In an *All My Children* kind of way! Does that happen often?"

"No. I've had one diabetic pass out due to low blood sugar, a girl unconscious from whippets, a couple of food poisoning cases, two guys fighting over a girl, and a drug dealer. This is the first female 'domestic dispute' I've had to worry about."

"Drug dealer? Seriously?"

"Pot. But he had distribution amounts. If you're over eighteen, a joint, or even a dime bag or two, will get you a violation, which is like a traffic ticket. He had a couple of kilos of the stuff."

"Holy shit!" Dona exclaimed.

"Yeah. That loss cut the supply on campus for months!"

"You toke?"

"No,' I replied, "but word gets around. Is Jocelyn back from her date?"

"No. I haven't seen her, but she said she probably wouldn't be back until close to midnight."

"Want to put on some music?" I asked. "You can select the album."

"Sure."

She went over to the shelves with my collection and chose *Hi Infidelity* by REO Speedwagon. She looked at me for approval to put it on the turntable, and I nodded. She adjusted the volume once *Don't Let Him Go* started and came to sit close to me on the couch.

"Any particular reason you picked this album?" I asked.

"I love REO, Styx, and Journey. But there's no special meaning like it's the first song I fucked to or anything like that!"

"Mind telling what the first song was?"

"There wasn't. I dragged Steve to my bedroom while my parents were asleep in their room and basically insisted he fuck me. He had been super sweet and had been very careful when we'd gone out, so I thought he might be a virgin. Boy, was I wrong!"

"Good?"

"He was REALLY good. In fact, he was great!"

"So what happened?"

"Like I said, I didn't know his reputation and thought he might be a virgin and that if we slept together, we'd be a couple. I was really upset when he told me he couldn't be my boyfriend, and I took it out on a girl named Bethany. I actually slammed her up against the lockers and told her to stay away from him. I basically lost my mind, told him off, and wanted nothing to do with him. Fast forward about a year, and my car broke down, and he saw me stranded. I told him to get lost, but he was kind despite me being bitchy and convinced me to accept a ride.

"After that, we got together a few times over the next year or so. In between, I dated a guy for about six months, we slept together twice, and I dumped him because he was SO bad at it and didn't seem to care about anything but cumming as quickly as he could. Last year, I dated a guy, but we never quite got to the point. What was your first song?"

"Every Woman in the World by Air Supply, and it wasn't my choice!"

"I like Air Supply a lot. I saw them in concert in Cincinnati. You obviously don't have to answer, but was it that blonde Russian girl?"

I chuckled, "Tasha featured in certain dreams during High School, but no, it wasn't her. It was the Summer after I graduated."

"You were eighteen?"

"Yes. I'm guessing you were fifteen or sixteen if you were a Sophomore."

"Fifteen. I don't regret doing it, just being an idiot about it. As I said, if I'd played my cards smarter, I might have had a chance because the object of HIS fantasies was in the Kelly Prager School of Abstinence, although she was really sweet, not a bitch, like I said. She was drop-dead gorgeous, too, just like your Russian friend. Was your first time good?"

"Very, but I was nervous as hell!"

"Join the club!"

"I'm curious," I said, "if you know where Steve is, why not get in touch with him and see if there's a chance to get back together with him? Maybe through your friend who was in the chess club with him?"

"Maybe I will," she said. "I can ask Larry if Steve has a steady girlfriend or not. The girl I slammed against the lockers went to UW-Madison."

"That's where my friend Dale is. Wait! Was this girl a cheerleader?"

"Yes."

I started laughing, "My friend Dale is hot for her, but he says she's hung up on a guy in Chicago."

"That has to be her, then, and the guy has to be Steve."

"It really is a small world. I still say you should ask."

"I will. What do your parents do?"

"My dad is a supervisor in the Harding County Property Division, and my mom is a legal secretary. What about you?"

"Mom is a homemaker, and Dad works for GE testing aircraft engines."

"As a pilot? Or in the factory?"

"In the plant in Evendale, near Cincinnati."

"Siblings?"

"An older sister; you?"

"A younger sister."

The final song on the A-side, *Take It on the Run* finished just then.

"Flipside or something different?" I asked.

"How about *Escape* by Journey?"

"You're a fan of *Don't Stop Believin'*?"

"Yes! Is that a problem?"

"Not really. It's pretty much the signature rock anthem."

I moved to change the album, and I heard the door close and lock as I lowered the tonearm. As Steve Perry sang '*Just a small-town girl, livin' in a lonely world,*' Dona came across the room, and I took her in my arms. We exchanged a soft kiss, and she put her head on my shoulder. I realized she wanted to dance, so we swayed gently to the music.

Dona had a sexy, compact body and nice, firm breasts, though they were on the small side, and she felt very good in my arms. I realized as we danced, I really liked her and, in a universe where I wasn't going to be ordained, she'd be someone I'd actually want to date. She was fun, smart, and sexy, and I enjoyed the time we'd spent together so far. And thinking about her that way, I realized she and I had a spark that Maggie and I never had.

There had been a spark with Laura, even before she'd spoken to me in Russian, and if I was honest with myself, there was more of a spark from Elizaveta's kiss on my cheek than with Maggie. That thought stunned me, but it confirmed that I did need to break things off with Maggie. Anything that might have been with her had died during her house arrest, and I didn't think it would come back.

The second song on the album, *Stone in Love* was far less well-known, and we continued swaying through it and into *Who's Crying Now*. That gave me more time to think about everything -- what Clarissa had suggested, what Tasha had said, and what Doctor Blahnik had said, and I felt my best course of action was to break things off with Maggie on Monday, keep my chess date with Grace, and enjoy my time with Dona. She could be my date the following Friday, assuming she was interested. The only thing I had to do was make sure we were on the exact same page. Whether I should talk to Elizaveta's dad was a separate question that I still needed to think about.

"Do you remember what I said about not being adventurous?" Dona asked as *Keep On Runnin'* began.

"Yes."

"I want to try 69, but I've never given a blowjob. Steve never asked for one, and my other boyfriend, well, once I realized he had no clue how to fuck, I dumped him like I said."

"Then we'll just have to practice a lot," I chuckled. "Well, assuming you want to."

"So now that you know my secret..."

"Mine will be on display, but we have to be on the same page here."

"Just sex? And only until the Summer session is over?"

"Actually, I decided to break up with the girl I was seeing, so if you wanted you could be my date next Friday when I'm supposed to go out with Clarissa and Jocelyn and their dates. If you don't want to, I can find someone else."

"I want to!"

"Full disclosure -- there's a girl I work with I'm going to see on Tuesdays to play chess, but otherwise, I don't plan to see anyone except Lara, who's supposed to visit for a few days in July. I do have church obligations, too."

"But I can sleep with you any night if I want? And we'll do stuff together? For the rest of Summer session."

"Yes to both."

"Then take me to bed."

"One minor change, if you don't mind."

"What's that?"

"Let's fuck ourselves silly tonight. 69 can wait."

Dona smiled, and we exchanged a soft, sexy French kiss, then undressed each other. My impression of her body was right, and I admired her from head to toe, enjoying the contrast of her tan and the areas her bikini covered. Her breasts were almost milky white next to her deep brown tan, and she seemed to beg me to suck on them. I scooped her up and carried her to the bed, where I feasted on her breasts, then drank her succulent juices directly from their source. I reached into the nightstand, took out a rubber, rolled it on, positioned myself against her, and pushed forward, easily sliding between her slick labia and into her tight, wet tunnel.

"Nice equipment," she whispered as I buried myself in her.

I kissed her softly, then asked, "What can I do for you?"

"I need a good, hard fucking for as long as you can go! And then a second and third to follow!"

I was only too happy to oblige and began moving inside Dona. She wrapped her arms and legs tightly around me and began bucking as if she were trying to throw me off the bed. I responded by pounding her as if I was trying to drive her through the mattress. She had a very strong orgasm, and we didn't break our rhythm, which prolonged it for more than a minute.

"God damn!" she gasped when her orgasm subsided.

She had another huge orgasm before we had fantastic joint orgasms about fifteen minutes after we had started. I made sure to carefully pull out, grasping the rubber, then grabbed a tissue, stripped off the rubber, wrapped it in the tissue, and dropped it on the nightstand. I lay back and pulled her to cuddle me.

"That," she sighed, "was awesome. Too bad you have to be up for church, or I'd have you do that all night!"

"I think we can manage twice more before I need to get to sleep."

"Yeah," she sighed. "I want that."

VIII. Matters of the Heart

June 17, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I'm going to break things off with Maggie tomorrow," I said after Clarissa, Jocelyn, and I arrived at Tasha's apartment for our usual Sunday dinner.

"What?!" Jocelyn exclaimed. "I thought you were going to take the Summer."

"I've thought a lot about it, talked with Tasha, talked with Clarissa, and had a short talk with Doctor Blahnik. Basically, I let my promise to Maggie cause me to ignore the reality of the situation."

"Lara?" Jocelyn asked.

"It's actually more about what's not there with Maggie than anything else. I realized last night that whatever spark we had died in the year she's been under what amounts to house arrest. I like her, but not enough for this to work."

"What brought this on?"

"Elizaveta staked her claim," Tasha interjected, "and after Mischa and I talked, he reevaluated his options. I still think he's going to be with Lara, but now he has a REAL option."

"What did she say?" Clarissa asked.

"She took me to task for never asking any of the girls out after Katy left for California," I replied. "She basically accused me of treating them as if there was something wrong with them because I kept bringing outside girls, non-Orthodox

girls mostly, to church. She has a legitimate point, though I didn't agree to do anything except talk with her, which I did at lunch today."

Jocelyn laughed, "She waited until Maggie was out of town to pounce! I'm curious, what was her argument?"

"She reeled off her skills -- cooking, baking, keeping house, child care, sewing, and so on, plus made it clear she knows what it means to be the wife of a doctor and a deacon, and pointed out that her parents' house has a cottage which would be big enough for us to start a family."

"It sounds like she felt she had one shot and had to get it all out there!" Jocelyn said.

"She's been eyeing Mike for the better part of a year, if not longer," Clarissa added. "But she has one major impediment which she can't really overcome except by time -- she's a Sophomore in High School."

"Robbing the cradle?" Jocelyn teased.

"Lara just turned seventeen," I replied. "And yes, I know what I've said in the past, but I'm not discounting Elizaveta. I can safely talk with her at church on Sundays, and if needs be, I can delay my ordination."

"So Lara is still your first choice?" Jocelyn asked. "With Elizaveta as a backup, if you will?"

"I suppose that's the case, so yes."

"Dona didn't sleep in her room last night."

"And you want me to say that she didn't *sleep* in my room, either?!" I chuckled.

"You took my advice?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes. And unless you or Jocelyn object, Dona will be my date on Friday for our triple date."

"No objection," Clarissa said.

"Me either," Jocelyn agreed. "Tasha, how are things going with Nikolas?"

"I'm having lunch at his house with him and his parents on Saturday."

"Your first date is lunch with his parents?" Jocelyn asked.

"As I said to Mischa, this must be done properly. If he were to decide to court Elizaveta, it would be the same. His first date, if you will, would be with her and her family. Mischa and I had some leeway and were allowed to have our first date alone, though he was at my house for dinner very soon after. In fact, given Elizaveta is only fifteen, he would probably only have supervised dates with her until she was at least sixteen."

"To prevent accidental coupling?" Clarissa teased.

Tasha laughed softly and said, "Yes!"

"Maggie is going to be very upset," Jocelyn said.

That was an understatement if there ever was one, but I really didn't see any way around it. In the end, time hadn't made MY heart grow fonder but had caused the relationship, such as it was, to wither. That had happened with Becky as well. We'd tried to keep it going, but my feelings for her had faded. If we had been

able to see each other regularly, things might have been different, but they weren't.

Dale and I had grown apart a bit, too. It wasn't that he wasn't my friend or even that he wasn't a close friend -- he was both of those. But our lives had diverged enough that the relationship wasn't the same. That said, if, by some miracle, he were to move back to the area, I was reasonably sure we'd rekindle that old relationship because it had been much, much deeper than any other relationship except for mine with Jocelyn.

That one had been tested by so many other things that the distance to Purdue was actually less of a concern than it otherwise might have been. My biggest fear for her going away was that it would cause exactly the same change in our relationship as Dale's leaving had caused in my relationship with him. The past year had been difficult, but we'd worked through it, and now she was back.

But Maggie was different because we had never formed a deep bond. I'd had, in fact, a deeper bond with Becky than I did with Maggie. I'd had a deeper bond with Angie, too, and truth be told, I had stronger feelings for Angie than I did Maggie. There was nothing to do about those, really, given Angie's condition and prognosis, but thinking about her made me realize even more that I was making a mistake with Maggie.

The point that really drove that home to me was telling Maggie that sex was basically off the table until at least engagement, if not our wedding night. I knew, deep in my heart, even if I couldn't necessarily express it, that something was missing with her, and despite being physically attracted to her, I felt sex was crossing a line which I shouldn't cross because I wasn't sure I could ever make the commitment to her.

"I know," I replied. "But the longer this goes on, the worse it's going to be. My mistake was trying to keep it alive after her dad interfered and refused to budge.

I kind of felt things dwindling, but I ignored those feelings, and now I'm going to hurt Maggie. But I think that's enough about this for now. What should I get Sasha for a wedding present?"

"Honestly?" Tasha replied. "A Sears gift certificate would be best. I'm not sure what they're going to need when they get their own place, but at the moment, they'll have everything they need at my parents' house."

"That's easy enough," I said.

"What if the three of us chip in?" Jocelyn asked. "You, Clarissa, and me?"

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"Same here," Clarissa agreed.

"Are either of you bringing dates?"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to bring Abby at this point," Clarissa said.

"Ditto for Bill," Jocelyn said.

"I will be bringing Nikolas," Tasha said. "What will you do, Mike?"

"Resolve the situation with Maggie and take it from there. I'll probably be asked to serve, anyway, so it's not as if I'd be standing in the nave with a date."

The phone rang, and Tasha got up to answer it. She looked surprised, then turned.

"Subdeacon, it's for you. Father Nicholas."

Now, I was surprised. I got up and went over to the phone.

"Yes, Father?" I said.

"Subdeacon, I'm sorry to disturb your Sunday meal, but Deacon Grigory was taken by ambulance to Moore Memorial Hospital."

"Lord have Mercy! Bad?"

"Very. Are you able to meet me at the hospital?"

"Yes, of course. I'll leave now, get my cassock, and be there in less than fifteen minutes."

"Thank you."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up.

"Deacon Grigory was taken to the hospital," I said. "Father says it's not good."

"Oh, no!" Tasha gasped. "Go, Subdeacon!"

"Do you need me, Petrovich?" Clarissa asked.

"I wouldn't mind the company, if Tasha doesn't mind. My cassock is in my car, so we just need to walk to the car, not go into the dorm."

"I don't mind, Clarissa," Tasha said. "I haven't started cooking. Jocelyn and I can spend time together."

"Go, Mik!" Jocelyn said.

I hugged Tasha and Jocelyn, and then Clarissa and I left her apartment. I bounded down the stairs, with Clarissa following close behind, and walked as quickly as possible to the dorm parking lot. I unlocked the doors, we got in and headed for the hospital, which was only a couple of minutes away by car. I kept the car right at the speed limit, we made both traffic lights in town, and twelve minutes later we were at the hospital. I jumped from the car, donned my cassock, and locked the car. Clarissa followed me as I walked quickly into the ER.

I saw Matushka Anastasia and Deacon Grigory's son, John, sitting on a small couch. She had obviously been crying, and John was comforting her.

"Good afternoon, Matushka Anastasia," I said. "Hi, John. Is there any word?"

"No," John replied. "They're working on him."

"May I ask what happened?"

"A heart attack, I think. The paramedics had to use their defibrillator on him."

"Is there anything you need?" I asked.

"Just prayers, for now, Subdeacon."

I nodded, then Clarissa and I sat down in chairs close to them to await any word. About five minutes later, the Sokolovs and Doctor Evgeni arrived, followed about a minute later by Father Nicholas. I got up, and after he had spoken with Matushka Anastasia, I asked for and received his blessing. He then took Doctor Evgeni and me aside to speak.

"What do you think, Evgeni Vladimirovich?" Father Nicholas asked.

"From what John said, either he suffered full arrest or had ventricular fibrillation. To be direct, the first is routinely fatal; the second is fatal if not caught in time. I would guess, based on the fact they are still working on him, he was found in V-fib after another heart attack. I've explained to you, Father, how weak his heart is."

Father Nicholas nodded, "You have."

"And, Father, the survival rates for V-fib outside the hospital are very, very low, less than 10%. Even in the hospital, they are well under 50%."

"Doctor Evgeni," I asked, "did anyone do CPR?"

"John did. I personally trained him for just such a situation. If Deacon Grigory survives, it will be because of that. But remember the statistics I gave you."

"Father, I see a doctor coming," I said.

Father Nicholas turned and hurried over to where Matushka Anastasia and John were sitting.

"I know that look," Doctor Evgeni said quietly. "If he takes them into that room over there, and I suspect he will, it means Deacon Grigory has reposed."

True to what Doctor Evgeni said, the ER doctor took Matushka Anastasia, John, and Father Nicholas into a small consultation room. Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov hurried over to where we were standing.

"Doctor Evgeni, do you think..." Mr. Sokolov asked.

"Yes, Lord have mercy, I think so."

A few minutes later, the door of the consultation room opened, and the doctor walked out. Doctor Evgeni went to speak to him, and John came out of the consultation room looking grim. He walked over to us.

"My father passed about five minutes ago. His heartbeat was irregular when he arrived, and treatments did not work."

"I'm very sorry, Ivan Grigorevich," Doctor Evgeni said. "Memory eternal."

"Memory eternal," I said.

"Memory eternal," Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov also said.

"Thank you, Doctor; thank you, Subdeacon; thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov."

"John, do you know if Father Nicholas called Vladyka ARKADY?" I asked.

"He said he called before he left the house."

"Go to your mother, Ivan Grigorevich," Doctor Evgeni said.

He nodded and turned back towards the consultation room. I excused myself and went to Clarissa.

"He died about ten minutes ago," I said quietly.

"I guessed from what happened. What's next?"

"A funeral service and burial. The church cemetery has plots available, which I expect them to use, though he may have made other arrangements."

"Always burial? Never cremation?"

"Too symbolic of the fires of hell," I replied, "though the Church grants «ekonomia» to the faithful in Japan where cremation is legally mandated by the government."

"As hidebound as your church seems, it's also extremely cognizant of the world around it and makes accommodations where it can reasonably do so. It's an odd dichotomy."

"The church has seen pretty much everything in the past 2000 years and usually comes to a proper solution which fulfills our goal of being in the world but not of the world, with a goal of making everything holy and bringing everything into union with God. Despite how it seems, the goal of healing of soul and body nearly always outweighs tradition."

"How do the memorial services work?"

"Generally, they are the 3rd, 9th, and 40th day, and then the one-year anniversary. So we'll do the first one following Vespers on Wednesday. Father will very likely schedule a special Vespers service on the 26th, which would be the 9th day, and the memorial service would follow Vespers. Forty days would be, uhm, the 26th of July, I think. The funeral itself will probably be Thursday morning."

"Do you have black vestments?"

I shook my head, "We wear white for funerals because it's the color of the Resurrection. At one point in Russia, it became usual to wear black, but we've returned to the older tradition. The Carpatho-Russian parishes, the ones who used to be Uniate, they still wear black."

"Uniate?"

"A long story, but at one point, some churches signed a concordat with Rome. Many of those returned to Orthodoxy at the urging of Father Alexis Toth, who, I suspect, will someday be Saint Alexis. He's buried at St. Tikhon's Orthodox Monastery in South Canaan, Pennsylvania."

"Is the funeral a liturgy, the way it is for Catholics?"

"No. It's basically a modified Matins service. The traditions for what exactly is done vary by parish, and I've never been to a funeral in this parish. Usually, the coffin is placed in the center of the church, open, and an icon is placed in the hands of the departed. In this case, it will be of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian Fathers. They made major contributions to the definition of the Trinity finalized at the First Council of Constantinople and to the final version of the Nicene Creed, which that council approved."

"How DO you remember all this stuff?"

"Lissa, do you listen to the hymns and readings about the saints in church?"

"Sure."

"Consider I've heard them year-in and year-out for twenty-one years, and I read the lives of the saints commemorated each day when I do my morning prayers."

"I see Father Nicholas coming out of the consultation room."

We walked over to join the small group.

"I'm going to do the prayers for after the departure of the soul with Matushka and John," Father Nicholas said. "Miloslava, would you begin calling the ladies of the parish, please?"

"Yes, of course, Father," Mrs. Sokolova responded. "Right away!"

"Subdeacon, would you get in touch with the choir director and lead chanter? Let them know the funeral service is going to be Thursday morning at 9:00am at the parish, with the burial in the parish cemetery immediately afterwards. I also need you to ensure everything is prepared. Alexey Ivanovich, I assume you will give Subdeacon Michael the day off?"

"Yes, of course, Father," Mr. Sokolov replied. "I'll have someone cover his shift."

"Unless you need something now, Father," I said. "I'll head to the church and ensure we have everything we need. If not, I can arrange to get anything we need from the church supply store in Pittsburgh by Wednesday."

"Thank you all," Father Nicholas said. "Oh, Subdeacon, please take Deacon Grigory's white vestments to the dry cleaner tomorrow, if you would. They'll do them overnight for us."

"I'll get them when I go to the church."

"Good."

I asked for and received his blessing, and then Clarissa and I left the hospital. We headed straight to the church, where I went to Father's office and retrieved a three-ring binder which listed everything we'd need for each service, then went to the chanter's stand and selected the correct liturgical book, and then Clarissa and I sat down at a table in the church hall so I could go over the order of service and the list of liturgical items.

"The only thing I think we're potentially short on are congregational candles," I said five minutes later. "I don't think we restocked those after Pascha. But those I

can get from the Roman Catholic supply store in Columbus. I'll drive up tomorrow right after work if necessary."

"What about your talk with Maggie?"

"I think that has to wait, unfortunately."

"A picture of your future life when church has to trump everything but medicine?"

"Pretty much. I need to go to the supply room and see if we have at least a case of congregational candles and the paper drip guards."

We went down the hall to the supply room. I unlocked the door and turned on the light. I found an unopened case of candles and an unopened package of drip guards, which meant I didn't need to make a special trip to get them. I'd place an order on Monday afternoon, and we'd have it in a week, which was sufficient. I turned off the light, locked the door, and put the liturgical book and notebook away. I went to the vestry and retrieved Deacon Grigory's white vestments -- *sticharion*, *orar*, and *epimanikia* -- folded them, and carried them out to the nave where Clarissa was waiting. We walked out to the parking lot, where I put the vestments in the back seat, then went back to set the alarm and lock the door.

"What do you want to do about dinner?" I asked.

"Chinese?"

"Sure. And let's stop by and see Tasha. I'm sure Mrs. Sokolova or one of the other ladies called her by now, but I want to make sure."

We drove back to campus, I quickly took the vestments to my room, noticed a note on my board, but decided not to check it until I got back after dinner. I

hurried back outside, and Clarissa and I walked to Tasha's apartment above the Quick Mart. She let us in a few seconds after I knocked.

"I had a call from Mrs. Artemav," Tasha said.

"I figured. Father gave me a few things to do, so Clarissa and I are going to get something to eat, then I need to make some phone calls."

"I can feed you," Tasha said. "I made enough because I thought you might be back late. And you can use my phone."

"Thanks."

She got a dish from the refrigerator, and I went to the phone and called the choir director and head chanter. The choir director had already heard, so I confirmed the time with him and asked him to make sure all the choir members had heard the news. The head chanter had not heard, so I explained what I knew, confirmed the time of the service, and verified he would attend the funeral.

"It will take about fifteen minutes to warm in the oven," Tasha said. "I only put it in the fridge a few minutes before you arrived."

"Will you be able to get Thursday morning off from work?"

"I'll ask in the morning, but I'm sure they will say 'yes'. I called my dad, so he's aware. He'll need to ask for time off, which is more difficult because he's the head pharmacist."

"What happens in a case like that?"

"In an emergency, he'll get a pharmacist from another pharmacy to cover for him if his assistant can't cover. If he can't get a licensed pharmacist to cover, then the

pharmacy technicians can take the prescriptions and prepare everything, but not dispense until he returns. The few times that has happened, it hasn't been too great a burden because mostly people allow a few hours for everything to be processed."

She offered us soft drinks, which we accepted, and, as she'd promised, served us a very tasty pasta dish made with tomatoes, chicken, mushrooms, and cheese. When we finished eating, we said 'goodbye' and Jocelyn and I walked Clarissa to Doctor Blahnik's house, and then Jocelyn and I headed back to campus.

"Uh-oh," I said, taking the note down from my board when we got to my room.

"What?"

"Hannah called twice, and I can't imagine any reason she'd call the desk downstairs unless there was some kind of problem."

I unlocked the door to my room, and we went in. I went over to the phone and dialed the number. Hannah answered on the second ring.

"It's Mike; what's up?"

"I was with Maggie at her house, like we planned, but then came home for dinner. When I went back to get Maggie, her dad told me she's not coming back to McKinley."

"Did you talk to her?"

"No. I tried, but he wouldn't even let me in the house."

"And everything was fine when you were there this afternoon?"

"It seemed like it, yes. Her parents seemed happy to see her, and there weren't any arguments."

"I'm not sure what I can do from here, but let me try to call her. If you hear from her, please call me."

"I will," she replied.

We said 'goodbye' and I pressed and released the switchhook and dialed Maggie's number. Her mom answered after four rings.

"May I speak with Maggie, please?" I asked.

"May I ask who's calling?"

"This is Mike Loucks," I said.

"She doesn't want to talk to you, Mike. Please do not call here again.

I heard a click as the call disconnected, so I simply returned the handset to its cradle.

"What?" Jocelyn asked.

"Her mom said Maggie didn't want to talk to me, told me not to call again, and then hung up."

"What the hell?"

"I can't imagine Maggie actually saying that," I replied. "Hannah said everything seemed fine before she went home for dinner with her parents. When she went to

get Maggie to bring her back to McKinley, Maggie's dad told her that Maggie wasn't coming back."

"I don't believe it," Jocelyn said. "I mean, if this was AFTER you told her you were breaking up, sure, I could see it. But she came to McKinley for the express purpose of being Mrs. Loucks. Did you say anything to anyone besides Tasha, Clarissa, and me?"

"Doctor Blahnik and Dona, but neither of them know her name or where she lives or anything like that."

"You didn't say anything to Liz when you talked to her earlier?"

"No. I trust Liz, given everything that's happened, but Maggie is her friend. I'm not sure what to do now."

"Do you have her brother's phone number?"

"I do. Good thinking, Jos!"

She laughed, "We always made a good team!"

"You chase ambulances and I'll heal them, then you can defend me in malpractice suits!"

Jocelyn laughed, "I want to do corporate litigation, not medical claims and malpractice!"

"And go blind on paperwork!"

"Medical charts?"

"Compared to legal briefs?"

"Good point. Make the call."

I looked up Karl Schumacher's number in my notebook and dialed it. I got a recorded message saying that the JAG office was closed, that I should call back during office hours, and if I had an emergency, to call the twenty-four-hour JAG hotline at a toll-free number, which was repeated twice. I didn't think the situation with Maggie qualified, so I hung up without writing down the number.

"That's his work number, and the JAG office is closed."

"I guess even the Navy gets time off!"

"Navy lawyers, anyway," I said. "Any other ideas?"

"None that I can think of. I mean, sure, you could drive to West Monroe, but the way things are going, her dad is likely to call the Sheriff on you for trespassing."

"I wonder if I should try one of her other friends? Violet, Valerie, or even Mindy?"

"Isn't Hannah her best friend?"

"Yes. Liz is a close second, but I figure my sister is just as tainted as I am."

"Probably."

"I don't have a home number for the lawyer she works for, or I'd call him. I guess I can call him in the morning. The Elberts are Karl's friends, so I don't think they'd have any chance of talking to Maggie, either."

"What if they filed a missing person report? That way, it's not you."

"Actually, even if they don't, I can find out if she told them she wasn't coming back!"

I dialed the Elberts' house, and Mary answered. I asked for Maggie, and she said that Maggie was late getting back but that she expected her any moment. I chose not to tell her what had happened and simply left a message asking Maggie to call.

"Nice move," Jocelyn said after I hung up. "At some point, they'll wonder where she is."

I nodded, "And they have Karl's home phone number."

"Do you think she's in any danger?"

"Danger? I doubt it. I can't imagine her parents actually harming her."

"Then I think you're right to let it play out. You're supposed to have a date tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, and that will give the Elberts and me a reason to call the Sheriff's department if the attorney, Mr. Jacobs, doesn't do it first, which I suspect he will."

"Are YOU doing OK?"

"I'm fine. Yes, this bothers me, but you know the conclusion I came to, and I just don't have a desire to pick a fight with her dad. He already sent Special Agents after me, and her mom sent the Sheriff. And if you're referring to Deacon Grigory, I was prepared and fully expected this. He's looked very sickly for the

last month, and his prognosis was poor. Father Nicholas and I even talked about this eventuality. What's YOUR take on the whole situation?"

"You mean Lara, Maggie, and the jailbait?" Jocelyn asked with a smirk.

I chuckled, "Which is EXACTLY why Tasha made her comment about courting!"

"Not to toss a monkey wrench into the works, but you and Dona seemed to hit it off."

"And she's singularly uninterested in becoming religious. She also still has a heartstring being tugged by a guy from back home. I encouraged her to try to get in touch with him. He was her first, they had a falling out, then reconciled, but he moved away. The thing is, she knows where he is, so I suggested she get in touch. The worst possible outcome is that he's seeing someone, but if he isn't serious, anything could happen. Back to my question."

"I'm totally with Tasha and Clarissa on the situation with Maggie. I can't quite put my finger on it, but there's something about the girls someone else has tried to fix you up with that doesn't feel right. That includes Tasha, by the way. Lara came to you on her own and hadn't even been in church in over a decade. Your jailbait acted on her own, too. I guess to me, those seem more authentic than being fixed up with Tasha or Katy by people in the church or Maggie by your sister. If you think about it, both of those girls made their moves knowing the situation."

"A point which came to me when I was trying to think this through. And the jailbait has a name -- Elizaveta."

"Awesome!" she declared, then simpered, "Oh, Liz, you feel SO good!"

"Not funny, Jos," I replied tersely.

"Sorry, it was a bad joke. Forgive me?"

"Yes."

"I'm curious, are there other nicknames for Elizaveta?"

"There are, but I don't like them -- Lizochka, Lizonka, Lizunya, Lizavetka, or Elizavetka. I'd probably go with something like «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*), which means 'bunny rabbit' or 'honey bunny'."

Jocelyn laughed, "As in fuck like..."

"You have a one-track mind, Miss Mills!"

"So does Tasha! I have ten dollars which say she's married by the end of the year!"

"I don't think I'll take that wager," I replied with a grin. "These kinds of things tend to go pretty quickly in the church amongst the traditional girls."

She raised an eyebrow and smirked; I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

"And with you, once you decide, I suspect," she said.

"If it is Lara, it could be anytime. If not, Elizaveta is, as you put it, 'jailbait' until next April. And that assumes that her parents would be willing to sign the papers, that the court would approve it, and that I would consider it beyond just theoretical."

"May I comment that most guys would jump at the chance to bed a willing, sexy fifteen-year-old?"

"You may, but most guys didn't report their sister's older lover for statutory rape."

"Sorry. I've done that twice in a few minutes."

"Don't worry about it. Right now, I need to worry about talking to Maggie and about the funeral."

"OK to come in?" Dona asked from the door.

"We were just finishing our chat," Jocelyn said. "Night, Mike."

"Night," I replied.

We exchanged a hug, and she left, closing the door behind her.

"How was your dinner?" Dona asked.

"Interrupted," I replied. "I think I told you the deacon at our church was quite ill from a heart attack?"

"Yes."

"He had a second one and didn't survive."

"Oh, gosh! I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. It wasn't unexpected, really. I went to the hospital, then had to take care of some things in advance of the funeral, which is going to be Thursday."

"Did you eat?"

"Yes. I stopped back at Tasha's apartment, and she fed me before I came back here."

"Are you doing OK? I can leave if you need to be alone."

I shook my head, "No, I'm happy to have company. Actually, that's not quite right; I'm happy to have YOUR company."

Dona smiled and gave me a hug and kiss.

"You're a sweet guy, Mike."

"Thanks."

"How about I put on *Bolero*, and you can teach me how to 69? I figure we just keep doing it until I get it right!"

I laughed and released her from the hug. She got the album from my shelf, put it on, and five minutes later, we were naked in bed, with Dona learning how to orally pleasure me while I did the same for her.



June 18, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I think I have the hang of it!" Dona said on Monday morning when I got out of bed to run. "It only took five tries!"

"You were a very good student and quick study!" I grinned.

I pulled on my running clothes, kissed Dona, then headed out for my run. When I returned, she'd left, which was normal, so I showered, did my morning prayers, then met her and Jocelyn for breakfast. As usual, Clarissa joined us in the cafeteria, I filled her in on the situation with Maggie, and she agreed with what Jocelyn and I had concluded the night before. When we finished eating, I went back to the dorm, retrieved Deacon Grigory's vestments, and took them to the dry cleaners on my way to the Quick Mart.

I took my break early so I could call Mr. Jacobs' office at 8:30am. His secretary answered, I asked for Maggie and the secretary said that Maggie hadn't shown up for work. I thanked her and asked her to have Maggie call me. It was still too early to call Chicago, so I went back to work, letting Grace know I'd take the rest of my break at about 9:30am so that I could make another call. This time, I reached the JAG office, asked for Lieutenant Commander Schumacher, and they put me through.

"Karl, it's Mike Loucks," I said.

"Hi, Mike! What's up?"

"Maggie went home as planned, but last night Hannah called and said your dad told her that Maggie wasn't coming back to McKinley. I called the house, and your mom said that Maggie didn't want to talk to me and told me never to call there again. I called Mary Elbert last night, and she said she was expecting Maggie back, but that Maggie was late. I called Mr. Jacobs, the attorney, and Maggie didn't show up for work, and the secretary seemed surprised by that."

"What the...let me call home. Is there a number where I can reach you today?"

I gave him the number for the Quick Mart and told him I could take a very short call, and gave him the number to my room as well as Doctor Blahnik's number.

He said he'd call me as soon as he had any news for me. I thanked him, we ended the call, and I went back to work.

"Problems?" Grace asked. "You seem distracted."

"Same problem as when the two Special Agents visited. Maggie's dad is causing trouble."

"I have no dog in this hunt, but she seems WAY too high maintenance!"

"And you are the epitome of low maintenance," I grinned.

"All I ask you for is for good company and good orgasms! No other demands. And I give as good as I get!"

"Are we actually playing chess tomorrow?" I asked with a grin.

"Sure! Same rules, too. It'll just determine who wins or loses, even though, ultimately, we both win! Or maybe I'll think up some variations!"

"We'll discuss that tomorrow night!"

She winked and went back to work. As I waited on customers, I thought about how the Summer had developed and how my plan for celibacy had gone right out the window. I wasn't quite sure how I'd so easily 'fallen off the wagon', as it were. I certainly hadn't sought out either girl, but in both cases, I'd very easily bantered my way into sexual relationships. That thought made me laugh because, in High School, I'd struck out more times than the Reds did in an entire season!

Karl finally called back just before quitting time, and Grace covered for me, even though, technically, I didn't have any break time left.

"I spoke to Len Jacobs and Mary Elbert, who confirmed what you said, which I expected them to. I called home, and my mom swore up and down that Maggie decided not to come back, but when I asked to speak to Maggie, my mom said she wasn't home. I called my dad at the base, but he was apparently tied up in meetings and hasn't called me back."

"This is very weird, Karl," I said.

"I agree, but short of making a police report, I'm not sure what to do."

"I think I'm going to suggest to Mary Elbert that she phone the police and say she's concerned that Maggie didn't come home. I don't see any other options unless you can come back to Ohio."

"I don't have any leave time at the moment. I could take emergency leave if I need to, but I'm not sure what I could accomplish. Go ahead and suggest that to Mary. I'm sure Len Jacobs will confirm that she was expected at work today."

"Thanks, Karl. I'll call over there later. Call me if you get in touch with your dad."

"I will. Keep me posted, Mike."

"Will do."

We hung up, and I went back to work. When Nancy came in to relieve me, she said she'd be covering my Thursday shift and working a 'double.' I thanked her profusely and offered to return the favor if she ever needed it. She said she could use the extra money, especially given that it was overtime, but said she'd let me know.

I headed back to the dorm and called Mary Elbert and asked if she had heard from Maggie, which she hadn't. I suggested she call the McKinley Police or the Hayes County Sheriff, and she agreed. I thanked her and asked her to let me know if she heard anything and promised to do the same.

I didn't hear from anyone by 8:00pm, so I decided to call Hannah to see if she'd been able to see or talk to Maggie. She said she hadn't, but that she suspected Maggie wasn't at the house. That made things not just weird but sinister, and I hoped that the calls Mary Elbert had made to the McKinley PD or Hayes County Sheriff bore fruit. Something was rotten in Denmark, and I had no idea what it was.

IX. Ineffable, Inconceivable, Invisible, and Incomprehensible

June 19, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday evening I played chess with Grace and I won with the black pieces, but we both won with orgasms afterwards. Grace hadn't come up with any rules variations, but she promised to think about it. When I got back to the dorms, Clarissa was with Jocelyn and Dona, and the four of us went to my room to hang out. Just after 9:00pm, the phone rang, and I jumped up to answer it.

"Mike, it's Hannah."

"Have you heard from Maggie?"

"No. There are two cruisers from the Sheriff's Department in the driveway. I went over earlier today, but nobody was home."

"Or didn't answer?"

"Both cars were gone, and I didn't see anyone moving in the house from my window."

"Did they come home?"

"At least her dad did. I haven't seen her mom's car."

"Weird. I take it nobody else has heard anything?"

"No. I talked to Valerie, Violet, Mindy, Emmy, and Liz. Nobody has heard from her. We all went out to dinner today at A&W. The cruisers were here when I got back."

"How is everyone?"

"Good. Your sister said she met someone. I guess he's the night manager at the motel?"

"Yes. She told me about him. And everyone else?"

"Good. Violet asked me to say 'Hi' and that if you were lonely, she'd be happy to help! Me too!"

"I appreciate the sentiment, but we need to focus on Maggie."

"I'm looking out the windows now and I see Maggie's mom's car now, but I can't see if anyone is in the passenger seat because the house and a tree are blocking my view. Wait! I see Maggie! Maybe we'll get to the bottom of this. I guess they just went inside."

"Call me back if you hear anything, please."

"I will."

I hung up and went back to the couch to sit next to Dona. Clarissa and Jocelyn were sitting on the other couch.

"Well?"

"Hannah was out to dinner with their little gang, and when she came home, the Sheriff's Deputies were at Maggie's house. I'm guessing they went in response to

Mary Elbert calling them. Hannah said she saw Maggie, who was with her mom, so maybe we'll get this sorted out."

"What do you think happened?" Dona asked.

I shrugged, "I have no idea. I can't imagine an Air Force Colonel holding his adult daughter prisoner. That would get him in far more trouble than my phone call."

We hung out for another thirty minutes, and then we walked Clarissa back to Doctor Blahnik's house. When Jocelyn, Dona, and I returned to the dorm, I heard my phone ringing. I hurriedly unlocked the door, went into the room, and snatched up the handset.

"Mike Loucks."

"Mike, it's Hannah."

"What's up?"

"I just talked to Maggie."

"And?"

"She claimed that the Air Force investigators showed her pictures of you with two girls. What's going on?"

"«Сукин сын» (*sukin syn*)!" I sighed. "How bad is this?" ("son of a bitch")

"*What did he say?*" I heard Dona whisper.

"*No idea, we need Clarissa,*" I heard Jocelyn whisper back.

"She never wants to speak to you again. I tried to talk her into letting you explain because I'm sure there's a good explanation. You have lots of female friends, so I can't imagine what the problem might be, especially after she said it was OK for us to be together."

I could. I had no idea when they had followed me or when they had taken pictures, but trading cars with Grace and driving to her house would be more than sufficient, and if they saw me together with Dona or with Elizaveta at church. Or it could have been me visiting Tasha or me and Jocelyn.

"Is she coming back to McKinley?"

"I don't know. She said she hadn't decided. Mike, can you come here? Maybe I can get her to talk to you."

"It's too late tonight, obviously, and tomorrow I have work and church, and Thursday is a funeral. I could probably come on Thursday evening. Try to talk to her tomorrow and call me, OK? Sometime after 8:30pm?"

"I will. I'll try, Mike."

"Thanks," I replied.

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up.

"What happened?" Jocelyn asked.

"I'm not completely sure, but supposedly, the Air Force investigators showed her pictures of me with two girls. Hannah doesn't know who because Maggie didn't tell her."

"You ONLY hang out with girls right now!" Jocelyn protested. "I mean, she knew about Clarissa, Tasha, and me."

"But not directly about Dona or my chess games with Grace."

"And she's not going to let you explain?" Dona asked. "I made THAT mistake, and if I'd let him explain and listen, things might have gone very differently. There's no way she can know I've spent the night, just that we've played mini golf."

"There is one way she could know," Jocelyn said. "Kelly."

"Kelly?" I asked.

"How did they know where you worked? Maggie's parents didn't know, obviously. Did you tell any of her friends?"

"Emmy and Liz know, but nobody else. Well, my parents, obviously, and others, but not anyone Maggie would talk to."

"I bet you anything they came here because they knew you were at Taft, talked to her, and she told them. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"«Говно»! (*gavno*)" I sighed.

"That one I know," Jocelyn said with a smile. "It means 'shit'. What was the other one, Mike?"

"«Сукин сын» (*sukin syn*) -- 'son of a bitch'."

"You were going to break up with her, right?" Dona asked.

"Yes, but I feel I failed her because I believe she believed that I was, well, behaving, I guess."

"But you guys weren't steady or exclusive anything, right?"

"Right."

"And she knew that, right?"

I nodded, "Yes, she did."

"Then I'm missing how you did anything wrong," Dona said firmly. "And why you think you need to explain anything to her. Are you going to apologize for doing something that was OK based on your relationship? I mean, you were fooling around during this past year, right? So why apologize when you weren't wrong?"

"She has a point," Jocelyn said. "And with whatever story those Air Force guys concocted, unless you can honestly deny the accusations and are willing to not just take Maggie back but commit to her, nothing you say is going to matter in the future, at least as I see it."

"That sentence should be taken out and shot!" I chuckled.

"Sorry, I was trying to think and talk at the same time!"

"I hope they teach that in law school because if they don't, you are in deep sneakers, Miss Mills!"

Jocelyn laughed, "I had a professor at Purdue who said 'deep kimchee' -- that's Korean pickled vegetables."

Dona laughed, "My dad would say that. He was an artillery forward observer in Korea. He'd go out into no man's land with binoculars and a rifle and call in artillery strikes."

"There's a guy at my old church who was a 'tunnel rat' in Viet Nam. He would carry a pistol, or explosives, into the tunnels or sometimes even carry a flamethrower to chase the Việt Cộng. He saw quite a few of his platoon killed during his tour. He was an atheist when he went into those tunnels, and he said that becoming Orthodox was the only thing that allowed him to sleep at night."

"We kind of got off track, Mike," Jocelyn said, "but I don't think you should go to see Maggie. Just let it go. There is really nothing you can do, given you intended to break things off with her."

"I hope you don't mind if I talk to Clarissa about this."

Jocelyn smiled, "I'd be surprised if you didn't."



June 20, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I think Jocelyn is right," Clarissa said as we headed to the church for Vespers.

"I know, but I still feel like a complete cad."

"Let's analyze this, and I think you'll see that Maggie might actually be crazier than Angie!"

"Lissa..." I sighed.

"Think, Petrovich! You fucked Maggie's two closest friends, and that, THAT was OK! You played chess and mini golf with two other girls, and that wasn't OK? Even add in Elizaveta kissing your cheek, and I have to ask -- does Maggie's reaction sound like the reaction of a sane person?"

"Those first two were sanctioned," I said. "And you know it's more than mini golf with Dona."

"But Maggie doesn't! Even if Kelly told the investigators Dona was sleeping in your room, basically the entire WORLD knows I was sleeping in your room regularly. I'm pretty sure she knew about that."

"I think so, yes."

"She's not reacting rationally," Clarissa said firmly. "Add in the fact you intended to break up with her, and I see no value in you going to see her. If you want absolution, go to confession. You don't need it from Maggie, and I think the only way you could get it would be to sleep with her, and THAT would commit you to a course of action you've already rejected."

"I still feel guilty," I protested.

"About Maggie? Or about Dona and Grace? I think your REAL issue right now is that you broke your own vow of chastity, one which I do not think you should have made, and you're blaming yourself for doing that and causing the problems with Maggie. May I be blunt?"

"That wasn't blunt?" I asked.

"I think you made a mistake with Jocelyn and should have stayed with her until the end of the Summer."

"But I wanted her to meet someone like Bill, just as I wanted you to meet someone like Abby! That said, I do feel uneasy about both Dona and Grace."

"Because in your heart, you've already decided on Lara, assuming she'll have you. And if she won't, you'll turn your attention to Elizaveta. And THAT is why you feel uncomfortable, not Maggie. Maggie hasn't been real for months. She's basically a product of you giving her your word when her dad grounded her and you feel guilty for giving her the books and the prayer rope, which caused her to be grounded."

"I do feel bad about that. Had I not done that, things would have been OK."

"Would they? Something else could have triggered it. And you know full well you needed her to be Orthodox before you could even think about a permanent relationship. Honestly, you should have stuck to Orthodox girls. I include Angie in that list because it took her about five seconds to become Orthodox, and she's been faithful even through her struggles."

"The message was loud and clear after the situation with April, but I missed it."

"You thought you could get anyone to convert to Orthodoxy, Mike. And I will say you've been a far better evangelist by just being you than that idiot who haunts the campus on Saturdays. That said, YOU need someone truly Orthodox, not someone who converts simply to be with you. Again, I think Angie was different, but you had difficulties with Janey, who you dated after she converted. You probably could have made it work with Jocelyn because of your deep, lifelong relationship, but you need someone like Tasha or Elizaveta. Lara is a bit of a special case, but she seems to have melded right back in."

We arrived at church, which caused an interruption in the conversation and which gave me time to think as we celebrated the Vespers service. Once it finished, everyone headed to the funeral home for the wake, as well as the

Pannikhída. Deacon Grigory was in an open casket, dressed in his vestments, something that was highly symbolic but also somewhat disconcerting. Funerals were so rare in my life that I wasn't quite sure what to think about the idea of an open casket.

I spent a few minutes talking with Vladyka ARKADY and paid proper respects to Matushka Anastasia and John, as well as Deacon Grigory's mother, who lived in Cleveland, and his brother, who lived in Richmond, Virginia. I had a brief word with Father Herman and a somewhat uncomfortable word with Deacon Vasily, who seemed to be biting his tongue the entire time. Clarissa and I spent some time talking to Liz and my parents and grandparents as well. Liz didn't say anything about Maggie, but I knew I needed to talk to her.

When Clarissa and I finally arrived back at the dorm, I called Hannah despite the late hour. She let me know that Maggie wasn't budging on not talking to me, which made it easier to tell her I wasn't going to drive to West Monroe on Thursday evening. I asked if Maggie was coming back to McKinley, and Hannah said she didn't know. I did ask her to have Maggie call me, though I didn't hold out a lot of hope that she would.

I ended the call, and then Clarissa and I left the dorm so I could walk her to Doctor Blahnik's house.

"Just let it drop," Clarissa said. "That really is the best course of action. Nothing you can do will make her less upset."

"What you said before -- about someone who converts just to be with me -- did that include you?"

Clarissa laughed, "Lesbian to straight?"

"Not what I meant, but it actually does make the point because it would have been forced, and who knows what problems might arise down the line."

"Exactly, Mike. I think you need someone who is what I heard Father Nicholas call 'cradle Orthodox'. Again, Angie is the exception. I know we keep mentioning her, but nobody, and I mean *nobody* has come close to what you had with her. And it developed naturally because your timeframe was, at that point, years down the road."

"Attending church seems to help her greatly," I replied. "There haven't been any formal studies done, but there are anecdotal reports that combining therapy, medication, and church shows better results in some people. And Angie is responding to that combination of treatments. Fundamentally, whatever Angie's altered reality is, going to church helps her."

"Just as it does you, Petrovich. Going to church refreshes and rejuvenates you and acts as an antidepressant. No matter how bad your mood is, just going into the building helps improve it. It's the place where you seek refuge from the world. The traditions and rituals ground you and let you deal with a, pardon the expression, crazy world. You even tell time by it, for Pete's sake!"

"I know, and that makes me wonder if that's what kept Angie stable between her two incidents until her condition became severe enough that medication was required. It's something I'm going to have to ask Doctor Mercer about."

"You still love Angie, don't you?"

"I don't even know how to begin to answer that question, Lissa. I suppose the shortest possible answer is 'yes', but it's more complicated than that."

"Because you don't know who she really is."

"That's a big part of it," I agreed, "Was I in love with the *idea* of Angie? I certainly was in love with the *idea* of Tasha, but it turns out I don't feel the way I thought I did about her. I can't even be sure exactly what it was I felt about Jocelyn. I know I loved her, but that word is so loaded with meaning and so overused that it's become somewhat useless. Even the most common Greek words for love -- «érōs», «philia», and «agápē» don't seem to have sufficient depth of meaning to describe my relationships with Jocelyn, Angie, and you.

"Even if I just think about you, to say 'I love you' doesn't even come close to doing justice to how I feel about you, how you're part of my life -- no, how you're part of me. I know 'soulmate' is supposed to refer to your perfect marriage partner, but that's you and me. And even then, the words do not do justice to the relationship. It's beyond words, or to borrow from the *anaphora* of the Divine Liturgy without being blasphemous -- 'ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever existing'."

"Can't be spoken, can't be thought of, can't be seen, can't be understood, yet always there."

I nodded, "Exactly. Or, to put it succinctly, words cannot do it justice, whether spoken or unspoken. I know that phrase is talking about God, but it succinctly describes what Jocelyn and I had and what you and I have."

"Not to throw everything into complete chaos, but are biological kids SO important to you that you couldn't be with Jocelyn?"

"That turned out to be a smokescreen," I replied. "It was the breaking of faith that was the real problem. I can't tell you how I would have reacted had she been honest with me from the start, but I simply couldn't deal with the fact that she hid something so important from me."

"Severing the link between your souls, or to put it in your typical way, the 'Vulcan mind meld' ended and can't be restored. And that didn't happen with me because we've been completely open and upfront about literally everything."

I nodded, "I was the first person you came out to, and I think the trust you put in me cemented that bond, and having learned from my past mistakes, I was determined never to keep anything from you and never to mislead you. Total, complete, frank honesty. A complete giving of myself to you with nothing hidden or held back. And, as I think about it, that is why you could make love with me. In fact, it's why you HAD to make love to me -- a total, complete giving of yourself to me."

"Yes," Clarissa agreed. "Sleeping naked together, even when we weren't lovers, was symbolic of the complete baring of our souls to each other. If we could be naked, in bed, cuddling, and it wasn't about sex, we could do anything together."

"I'm not sure if I should shake my fist at God for making me male or for making you lesbian."

"And yet, I don't think we'd be where we are if either of us were different people. As you said, 'Petrovich and Lissa' is something very, very special, and it depends on you being 'Petrovich' and me being 'Lissa'. Whatever plans God has for us, or the universe, or Fate, or whatever, it's grounded in the concept of 'Petrovich and Lissa', which is only possible because you ARE Petrovich, and I AM Lissa."

We reached Doctor Blahnik's house, and Clarissa and I hugged tightly for a few minutes before she went inside, and I headed back to campus, taking a slightly longer route than normal to allow the full weight of our conversation to sink in.

When I arrived back at the dorm, there was a note on my board from Dona asking me to let her know when I returned, so I went down to the room she

shared with Jos. I chatted for a bit with Jocelyn, and then Dona and I went back to my room.

"I want to do something different," I said as we got into bed.

"What?" Dona asked.

"Let me teach you to slow dance," I said.



June 21, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday morning, I slipped out of bed, put on my running clothes, and went out for my usual morning jog around the campus. Similar to going to church, my morning runs provided a recharge despite the expenditure of energy. I found that on days I didn't run, my head wasn't as clear, and my mind wasn't as sharp, and I decided that rather than just running five days a week, I'd switch to running all seven.

When I returned to my room after my run, Dona was still there, which was out of the ordinary.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

I nodded, "Yes. With everything going on, I just needed something different last night. With what happened with Maggie, the wake, and the funeral today, I needed comfort more than anything else."

"It was just very, very different, very tender, very loving. The orgasms were different, too. I'm not quite sure how to describe them except to say they were

gentler, but they were also exhilarating. Every time before, it was like falling off a cliff; this was more like floating down on a parachute."

"Mind if I shower while we talk?" I asked.

"No, go on."

I stripped off my shorts, T-shirt, briefs, and socks, then adjusted the shower spray and got in.

"For me," I continued, "there are two very different needs. One is physical, and the other is emotional. In my case, the physical gets in the way of the emotional and overwhelms it. Doing what we did last night, what I called a 'slow dance', provides physical fulfillment in such a way that it doesn't interfere with fulfilling my emotional needs."

"Who knew guys had emotional needs with regard to sex?" Dona replied.

I looked over to see a silly smile on her face, indicating she was teasing, at least a bit.

"Maybe me more than others," I replied. "But maybe not because I don't talk about stuff like this with other guys. Maybe it's what my friends call my feminine side, something I think I may have suppressed a bit too much."

"What do you mean?"

"I think in my efforts to be more decisive and strong, I've lost some empathy, but I've also allowed what Jocelyn calls 'testosterone poisoning' to overwhelm my decision-making process."

"Wait, are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"I'm saying I have been struggling with the idea of sex outside of marriage from the time I turned fourteen when my sex drive kicked in. I spent years agonizing about it; wanting to do it but being concerned that I'd lose control. I kept asking myself how many lovers was too many, and well, I passed any rational threshold in my mind a LONG time ago. And that made it easier to just keep doing what I was doing because I was already past the limit, so I began to think that adding to the number no longer mattered. And that gave me license to just do whatever I wanted."

"Are you talking about me?"

I shook my head, "No. Well, OK, yes, a little bit, but you are not the problem, nor am I saying THIS particular situation is wrong. It's kind of the sum total of everything. And I can't point specifically to where things really began to go off the rails, though I'd say the Summer between Freshman and Sophomore year. Starting last Fall, I began justifying everything by saying I was weak, and that became the excuse. And that weakness was exactly what Jocelyn was referring to when she called it 'testosterone poisoning'."

Dona frowned, then said, "I'm confused."

I got out of the shower and began drying off.

"Me, too," I said with a smile. "But one thing is for sure -- I have to get control of myself. I've known that for some time, but I always set some future date for that. Have you heard the quote '*O Lord, give me chastity and continency, only not yet!*'?"

"No, but I never went to church."

"I actually didn't hear it in church, but it is from a bishop named Augustine of Hippo in Numidia, which would be in modern-day Algeria. He was a libertine

and didn't want to give up his libertine lifestyle for his calling. That was his basic philosophy and one which I adopted. And funnily enough, with the same general destination -- being ordained into a major order of the clergy."

"So you want to stop sleeping together?"

"There's another quote, this one from the Bible. The Holy Apostle Paul wrote: *'For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now, if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord!'*"

"So he's saying basically you know what's right and what's wrong, but you do what's wrong even though you knew better?"

"Precisely," I said, pulling on a clean pair of briefs. "And he says that sin is responsible for that. But, of course, that is no excuse."

"You think sleeping with me is a sin?"

I smiled as I pulled on a black T-shirt, "I *know* sleeping with you is a sin. I'm sure of it. And yet, I continue to do it."

"Won't that send you to Hell or whatever?"

I shook my head, then took a black button-down shirt from a hanger.

"The only way to go to Hell is to send yourself there by refusing God's love."

"So then what?"

"I don't know yet. But what I do know is that I need to get control of myself. I know where to start, and that does not affect you and me."

"But I feel like a Jezebel."

I grinned, "A Biblical reference. Do you know the story?"

Dona shook her head, "No, just that she was someone who lured men with sex."

"The actual story is about her interfering with the worship of Yahweh, which is the personal name of God, as Christians, Jews, and Muslims know Him. It was apostasy that she encouraged, and it wasn't through sex. She attacked and killed all the prophets of Yahweh and imposed her religion on Israel. Later, though, because of some things which happened at the end of her life, Christians associated her with promiscuity."

"Apostasy?" Dona asked.

"Sorry -- it means abandoning your religious beliefs."

"So Jezebel wasn't the harlot?"

I sat down and pulled on a pair of black socks.

"She was, but not in a literal sense. The Bible says that Israel played the harlot with other gods, but that's a metaphor. The Bible uses sexual imagery as a metaphor for apostasy. Like a man who goes with prostitutes, so was Israel when she went with other gods. Somewhere along the line, Christians mixed the metaphor and reality and associated Jezebel with sex outside of marriage, along with makeup and wigs. That latter part is because she dressed up right before she was murdered, and there is an association between harlots and makeup and wigs."

"Hookers who go all 'Tammy Faye Baker'?"

I chuckled as I took a pair of black slacks from a hanger and pulled them on.

"I suspect it's the other way around, but she would be a prime example of someone who does not fit the traditional Christian model. At the funeral this morning, I daresay you won't see any makeup except perhaps a touch of rouge or eyeshadow. Most Orthodox women don't wear lipstick."

"Why is that?"

"It would destroy the icons which we venerate with kisses, or leave red marks on the priest's hand when it's kissed, or on the blessing cross when it's kissed. Not to mention the chalice."

"You guys sure kiss a lot!" Dona laughed.

"Russian men greet each other by kissing on the cheeks, which I'm sure you've seen on TV. Mostly, that's the older generation, who were born in Russia, but even I, whose mom was born here, do it occasionally. It's a cultural thing that actually predates Christianity in Russia."

"I need to get a quick shower, get dressed, and come back for breakfast. What time are we leaving for the church?"

"8:00am."

"OK. I'll be back in a flash!"

She got out of bed, pulled on her shorts and T-shirt, grabbed her bra and panties, and hurried out of the room. I said my morning prayers, finishing just before

Jocelyn and Dona arrived so we could go to breakfast. We met Clarissa in the cafeteria, ate quickly, and then the four of us walked to the parking lot, where I got my cassock from my car. Once I had it, we got into Jocelyn's Tempo because it was more comfortable for four than my Mustang, especially given Jocelyn's physical ailments.

"Any tips?" Dona asked. "I've never been in an Orthodox church before."

"Just stick with me," Clarissa said. "I'm no expert, but I think we can avoid making complete fools of ourselves."

I chuckled, "If you just do what everyone else does and follow along in the service book, which also tells you what to do, you'll be fine. This service is very simple, in that mostly you'll stand quietly, recite a few prayers, and pray if it suits you."

"What happens at the graveside?" Jocelyn asked.

"A short prayer service, to bless the grave, which includes pouring wine, oil, and some «κόλλυβα» (*kollyva*) into the grave."

"What's «kollyva»?" Dona asked.

"Boiled wheat. It's a traditional dish, and there are variations as to what other ingredients are added. The point of it is the symbolism that wheat can only grow from a grain buried in the ground, which represents the Resurrection. Literally, everything we do has some kind of symbolism, and nearly all of it is resurrectional. After the burial, there will be a memorial meal at the church. And fair warning, it's a celebration, not mourning. The other thing not to be surprised about is that we'll all be wearing our white vestments, which we use for Pascha and the weeks following. I'm sure you can guess why."

"The Resurrection," Dona said.

"Exactly. The service will take about an hour, then we'll simply move out to the parish cemetery. The graveside service will take about twenty minutes, if even that. Then we'll go back into the church to have the meal. Oh, and I don't remember if I said so, but our Bishop will be here, along with priests from churches in Rutherford, Columbus, Dayton, and Cincinnati. There may be others as well, plus a number of deacons."

"What do you do?"

"Like all men in the church -- whatever I'm told!" I chuckled. "My main task will be to assist Subdeacon Anthony in helping the Bishop put on his vestments, which are fairly complicated. After that, it all depends on what the Bishop needs."

We arrived at the church just as the men from the funeral home were carrying the casket inside. I parked, we got out of the car, I donned my cassock, and we went into the building. I went to the room next to Father Nicholas' office, which was reserved for the Bishop's use, and found him with Fathers Nicholas and Herman, as well as Subdeacon Anthony. After receiving a blessing, I went with Subdeacon Anthony to lay out and prepare the episcopal vestments and other liturgical items we'd need.

True to my earlier suggestion, once the Bishop was vested, my role was limited to holding his staff while Subdeacon Anthony attended to adding incense to the censor, which Vladyka swung throughout the entire sixty-minute service, which concluded with the congregation singing *Memory Eternal*, after which everyone filed past the casket and venerated the cross.

We waited in silence as the men from the funeral home carefully closed the casket, then carried it from the church. Subdeacon Anthony and I gathered the items we'd need and carried them outside to the parish cemetery.

Everyone had assembled outside, and the casket was placed on a system of straps and pulleys which would allow it to be lowered into the grave. We gathered around the gravesite with the Bishop, and he led us through the prayers, after which Father Nicholas poured small amounts of blessed wine, blessed olive oil, and blessed «kollyva» into the grave. Once that was completed, the casket was lowered, and the congregation filed by the grave, dropping flowers, which we were handed by the ladies of the church, into the grave. John went last and deposited a handful of dirt on his dad's casket.

We all went back inside the church, where after removing our vestments and after I helped Subdeacon Anthony pack the Bishop's things, we joined the congregation for the memorial meal. There was wonderful food, wonderful stories, and lots of laughter, and the air was similar to the after-Pascha party in that we celebrated the eternal life into which Deacon Grigory had entered.

Late in the afternoon, Clarissa, Jocelyn, Dona, and I headed back to campus.

[Author's Note: To view an Orthodox funeral and graveside service, which also includes full military honors by the US Navy, please visit <https://emn2jsadams.com/videos.html>]



June 22, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Do you have a minute?" I asked Grace as we left the Quick Mart at the end of our shifts on Friday afternoon.

"Sure."

We walked to Verner's, where we got milkshakes, and went to sit on a bench in the small park behind the store.

"Do you remember you said you wanted someone cool and fun to hang out with?"

"Sure," she replied apprehensively.

"I'd like to reset our relationship."

"No sex?"

"Correct."

"Why?"

"I'm trying to properly order my life. First, starting Sunday, Clarissa and I need to spend three or four hours every night studying for the MCAT, as well as time on Saturday and Sunday. I'm not going to have a lot of time for anything but that, church, karate, and work. I also have an internal philosophical conflict that I need to resolve. And you knew it had to end before school started because of the girl I told you about."

"You know I'm totally mellow, but our Tuesday chess games are a few hours of fun, and nobody is getting hurt, right?"

"The answer to that is actually complex. This is just what I need to do for myself, and it is not because of anything you've done or didn't do. I enjoyed our Tuesdays!"

"So why stop? It's just casual, right? Or are you going to go steady with someone?"

"It's not about you or about going steady; it's just me trying to put my life in order. I'm more than happy to be your friend, and you're more than welcome to join my gang when school starts. And I'd like to keep playing chess."

Grace nodded, "This is a first for me! A guy asking me not to have sex with him! I'm tempted to ask for an exception if I happen to beat you at chess!"

I chuckled, "And no worries if I throw the game because you win that way, too!"

"Tell me with a straight face that you made up the rules for 'strip chess' without realizing the guy won every time!"

"Believe it or not, I heard them from a girl who told me it was a girl who made them up so she and her boyfriend could win chess matches at tournaments."

"How would that work? I mean, it's not like you can strip in public!"

"To unnerve their opponents. It worked, apparently."

"Can we make that deal?"

"As tempting as it is, I need to stick to this decision."

"You can't blame a girl for trying!"

"Not at all. I'm not upset or offended; in fact, I'm flattered."

"If you change your mind..."

"...you're the first in line," I chuckled. "God, I hate that song!"

"Not an ABBA fan?"

"My sister is, and she played those ABBA albums on and on and on!"

"Mamma Mia!" Grace teased.

"The LAST thing I'll ever say to them is 'Thank you for the music!'"

We both laughed, finished our milkshakes, and parted with a hug. I headed back towards campus, feeling I'd made the right decision with regard to Grace. When I got back to the dorm, I called Liz and was happy that she was home.

"Did you talk to Maggie," I asked, "or did you only get second-hand information?" I asked.

"Just from Hannah," Liz replied. "Something is VERY strange because, according to Hannah, Maggie knew you were with Hannah and Violet. And Maggie told you she was OK with you being with her friends before you two could see each other. She told her friends it was OK, too."

"Hannah told you I was with Violet?" I asked.

"Yes, but only the other night when the shit hit the fan, so to speak. I didn't even suspect!"

"Did Hannah have any idea who Maggie was accusing me of being with?"

"No. I'm guessing you have some suspects?"

"A couple of girls I've been hanging out with, plus Elizaveta, who announced her intention to vie for my affection."

Liz laughed, "Old news. I knew that was going to happen. Even though I'm not at church, I saw Susana at school, and she knew that Elizaveta was interested."

"She warned off the other girls?"

"Standard tactic! Tasha did that!"

"True."

"So these girls you were hanging out with?"

"No public displays of affection except one of them looping her arm through mine once when we walked, and then Elizaveta kissing my cheek after Vespers when she declared her intentions."

"Very weird. And these Air Force investigators spied on you?"

"Supposedly. And you know I hang out with Clarissa, Jocelyn, and Tasha, but Maggie knew about them."

"Something doesn't add up. Did she come back to McKinley?"

"I don't know. Clarissa and Jocelyn encouraged me to let it drop because I was planning to tell Maggie I didn't think we had a future."

Liz sighed, "I was pretty sure that was the case. Her dad got his wish by keeping you two apart."

"I know. Speaking of apart, I hear you told people you met someone."

"Yes. I haven't been on a date with Paul yet, but I told my friends I'd met someone and was having breakfast with him every Saturday. He's going to ask me out sometime next month."

"OK. I plan to stop in Rutherford to see you on the way back from Cincinnati. We're taking the MCAT on the 13th, and then I'm seeing Angie and Doctor Mercer on the 14th. Are you free for lunch on the 14th?"

"Sure! You'll have Clarissa with you?"

"Yes."

"How about we double-date? That would be a very safe first date, AND if he tells his Parole Officer you'll be there to supervise, that would be good."

"Then let's plan on that. How is everything else?"

"Great. I love my hostess job. Emmy and I are having a blast, and I'm actually counting down the days until school starts."

"When do you plan to break the news to Mom and Dad?"

"How about the Sunday afternoon after our date? Could you come home after church?"

"Probably. Lara is supposed to visit in July, but I don't know when. I'll let you know, OK?"

"Sure. I love you, Mikey!"

"I love you, Liz!"

After I hung up with Liz, I took a quick shower and then dressed for the planned triple date. When I was ready, I went down the hall to get Dona and Jocelyn, and we headed to my car. We stopped at Doctor Blahnik's house, then headed to Frisch's, where we met Bill and Abby. Bill was about my height, maybe a smidgen taller, blonde, blue-eyed, and in good shape, though not muscular. Abby was brunette, about Clarissa's height, slender, with brown eyes, After introductions, we reviewed our menus and placed our orders.

By the time we finished dinner, I was sure I liked both Abby and Bill, and I was happy for Jocelyn and Clarissa. As a group, we decided to see *Ghostbusters*, which we all found absolutely hilarious. When the movie finished, the six of us went to Doctor Blahnik's house to hang out for the rest of the evening.

X. Love And Other Things

June 23, 1984, West Monroe, Ohio

I'd had to skip my Saturday morning mini-golfing with Dona because Clarissa and I needed to be in McKinley for Sasha's 11:00am wedding. Saturday weddings were not the norm, but Vladyka ARKADY had granted «ekonomia» because of the circumstances. While we were in the Apostle's Fast, there were no strict canons against marriage during the Apostle's Fast like there were for the Dormition Fast, which would begin in a week. Given the delays caused by the government, the bishop had felt «ekonomia» fully justified, and while my opinion on the matter wasn't particularly relevant, I agreed with him.

Given the simplicity of Orthodox weddings, I didn't have to serve, and Father Herman didn't ask, which meant I could stand with Clarissa and my family. Tasha had invited Nikolas, which drew a number of confused looks, telling me that Deacon Vasily hadn't said anything publicly about Tasha and me ending our relationship. Jocelyn and Bill arrived not long after Clarissa and I did.

The wedding began with a blessing of the rings, and then they were placed on Sasha's and Yaroslav's right ring fingers, though I suspected they'd move them to their left hands to follow the American tradition rather than the Orthodox one. I intended to do that, as my parents had, because otherwise, the symbolism of the rings would be lost on everyone who wasn't Orthodox.

Once the rings were exchanged, Deacon Vasily handed Yaroslav and Sasha each a candle, and they joined their right hands for the 'crowning' ceremony. Father Herman blessed the ceremonial crowns which the parish owned. Smaller, less elaborate crowns would replace them for the reception, and they'd take those smaller crowns home to display in their icon corner.

I wasn't surprised to see Mr. And Mrs. Orlov acting as sponsors for the soon-to-be newlyweds. As Father Herman prayed, they switched the crowns back and forth between Sasha and Yaroslav. Deacon Vasily read the Scriptures, and then Sasha and Yaroslav shared a common cup of wine, and then followed Father Herman, Deacon Vasily carrying the censer, and an acolyte with the processional cross around the table in the 'Dance of Isaiah'. Father Herman then gave the final blessing:

"Be thou magnified O Bridegroom, as Abraham, and blessed as Isaac, and multiply as Jacob. Walk in peace and work in righteousness, as the commandments of God.

And thou O Bride, be thou magnified as Sarah, glad as Rebekah, and multiply like unto Rachel, rejoicing in thine own husband, fulfilling the conditions of the law, for so it is well pleasing unto God."

The ceremonial crowns were removed and replaced with the smaller ones, and with that, the wedding was over. Everyone followed the bride and groom to the church hall for the celebration.

"I find it weird that there are no vows," Clarissa said quietly.

"If you have to be reminded of what marriage means at that point, you probably shouldn't be getting married," I teased. "But it's also the case that the Orthodox never adopted the legal trappings of the Carolingian Empire, which the Roman Church followed, which had their roots in the Latin legal system. Marriage isn't a legal contract which can be annulled."

"Hi, Mike," Janey Riley said, coming up to me.

"Hi, Janey, how are you?"

"Good. What's with Tasha? I thought you guys were destined for the same place as her little sister!"

"We agreed we didn't belong together," I said. "It was a mutual decision. You remember Clarissa, right?"

"I do. Hi, Clarissa!"

"Hi!" Clarissa replied.

"How is school going?" Janey asked.

"Good. You?"

"Same. Are you dating anyone?"

"I'm exploring a relationship with someone."

"What the heck does that mean?" she asked.

"To make a long story short," I said, "the bishop wants to ordain me a deacon when I graduate."

"You're going for an arranged marriage?!" Janey exclaimed.

"One we're arranging ourselves," I replied.

"That's nuts!"

I smiled, "My approach to life was never going to match yours."

"So, where is this girl?"

"On a cruise with her parents," I replied. "She lives near Pittsburgh."

"Russian?"

"Yes."

"Of course. Well, it was good to see you."

"And you," I replied.

Janey walked away, and Clarissa and I got in line to get something to eat.

"She ran away like you had bubonic plague," Clarissa said quietly.

"She never understood me, which was the fundamental problem with our relationship. She helped me see that my focus was too narrow, but I was never going to broaden it enough for her."

"She's not 'cradle', either."

"No, but she is," I said, nodding slightly to direct Clarissa's attention to Susana.

"Those CAN'T be real!" Clarissa whispered.

"She turned fifteen in May," I replied quietly.

"She could feed Africa with those!"

I laughed and began filling my plate with food from the various serving platters and crockpots. If there was one thing that was certain, basically every woman in

the church was a great cook, and parties brought out the best in them. With plates full of food, Clarissa and I went to sit with Tasha and Nikolas. Jocelyn, Bill, Liz, Larisa, and Susana joined us, as did a few other college-age and teenage members of the parish.

"Are you staying for Vespers?" Tasha asked me.

"No. We'll leave in time to go to Vespers at Saint Michael. I really need to limit the number of services I miss.

"Will you be ordained a deacon soon?" Susana asked.

I was reasonably sure she knew the answer to that question, given what was common knowledge.

"There is NO chance, and I mean ZERO, of that happening before I marry!" I replied, causing the teens and young adults at the table to laugh.

"So you're looking for a wife?" she asked.

She knew THAT, too, because I was certain Elizaveta had warned her and others about her interest in me.

"I'm considering my options," I replied with a smile.

I saw Clarissa smirk out of the corner of my eye, and I gently kicked her under the table. I also saw Tasha hiding a smirk behind the glass of lemonade she was pretending to drink. I was tempted to kick HER under the table, but I didn't want to do anything which might offend Nikolas.

"In all seriousness," Ivan, who I believed was sixteen, asked, "are you going to accept an arranged marriage?"

"Probably not in the traditional sense," I replied. "But there are a couple of girls I'm interested in, and we'll investigate. If neither of them works out, then I may resort to asking the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*)!"

Everyone laughed again. When we finished eating, Clarissa, Jocelyn, and I went to greet Sasha and Yaroslav, and I handed her the envelope with the gift certificate that Jocelyn, Clarissa, and I had contributed to and wished them the best.

"Thank you, Subdeacon! Thank you, Clarissa! Thank you, Jocelyn!"

"You're welcome," I replied, with Clarissa and Jocelyn joining in.

"Thank you for coming, Subdeacon," Deacon Vasily said, in what I felt was a more accepting mood, which made me happy.

"You're welcome, Father Deacon," I replied. "And if you'll excuse us, we need to head back to McKinley for Vespers tonight."

"Of course!"

Clarissa and I went to say 'goodbye' to my parents and Liz and then left the church hall. We were just about to leave the building when I heard Larisa call to me. Clarissa smirked, though Larisa couldn't see because Clarissa was facing away. I turned and walked back.

"Hi, Larisa," I said.

"What happened with Maggie?" she asked.

"I honestly have no idea. All I know is what Hannah told me, which I'm sure is the same thing she told you. It makes no sense to me."

"Nor to any of us. Maybe something with her old church?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea, but she was attending services at Saint Michael with me."

"Weird."

I chuckled, "That's pretty much what everyone has said. I asked Hannah to let me know if she heard anything. If you hear anything, I'd appreciate if you let me know. Liz knows how to get in touch with me."

"I will!"

"Thanks!"

"Come visit sometime!"

"I'll be visiting Liz in a couple of weeks."

"Cool! Bye!"

"Bye!"

She turned and left, and I walked back to Clarissa, and we went out the doors.

"I expected her to throw her hat into the ring!" Clarissa teased.

I shook my head, "None of Maggie's friends will do anything with me, including flirting, until somebody finds out what's going on. They all agree it's weird, and none of them have a clue."

"And Susana?" Clarissa asked with a smirk.

"I'm not interested in her at all, even if things don't work out with Lara or Elizaveta."

"Do you still suspect Kelly?"

"I can't imagine who else, but even so, if she said I was sleeping with Dona, it shouldn't have created THIS problem."

"What if she told them you were sleeping with me and Jocelyn. Together."

"In my dreams!" I chuckled.

"Ah, good, the pig is still there!" Clarissa teased. "I was wondering!"

"Something like that WOULD have upset Maggie. That was a red line Angie told me never to cross."

"Jeannette and Marie?"

"Specifically, but also in general. And if you think about it, it makes sense that something like that would upset someone who saw me as their potential husband, especially if they were a virgin, which Maggie is and I believe Angie is."

"Believe?"

"We don't know what happened to Angie in the past," I said.

We got into my Mustang, I started the car, and pulled out of the parking lot.

"That thought had crossed my mind," Clarissa said. "That her hang-up about sex wasn't just about her friend and her brother or about seeing her parents, but about some kind of physical abuse."

I nodded, "Me, too, but there may be nothing, too. Nobody knows for sure what causes schizophrenia. And at this point, I'm actually betting on nothing, but I realize anything is possible."

"Why nothing?"

"A gut feeling, I guess, combined with everything Doctor Mercer has said and my talks with Angie."

"What can you glean in five minutes?"

"A feeling."

"Are you thinking what I'm afraid you're thinking?"

"No. There is no chance of a relationship of any kind with Angie. Well, that's not entirely true. I can be her friend, but that's it. I have listened to Doctor Mercer, and I believe her."

"But you still love Angie."

"Didn't we have this discussion? Whatever it is I feel for Angie, there is a reality which I can't deny."

"Do you love Lara?"

"Wrong question, Lissa."

"CAN you love Lara?"

"Yes."

"Just like that? A decision?"

"No, it can't be that. That makes it too easy to decide NOT to love someone. But I can learn to love her. That is how it works in arranged marriages."

"Learn?"

"Did you love me from the start?"

"No, of course not."

"Are you *in* love with me?"

Clarissa smiled, "I get your point. You and I grew to love each other, but we were never 'in love' in the way most people mean it."

"That's what will happen with Lara if she's up for the challenge."

"You think she is."

"I do."



June 24, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Subdeacon, where is Maggie?" Father Nicholas asked on Sunday morning before Matins.

"I believe she's at home in West Monroe, but I'm not sure. And I also have no idea what's going on. I haven't spoken to her for over a week. We went to dinner about a week ago, and everything seemed fine to me."

"You didn't have a fight?"

"No. I'm sure you're aware that her dad was upset she decided to move out of the house, but her brother mediated, and I urged her to reconcile with her parents. That's what she was doing last weekend. She went home, as planned, but then didn't come back. I called the house, and her mom told me Maggie didn't want to speak with me and I should never call there again."

"What in Heaven's name did you do?"

"Father, if I knew, I'd tell you. Even her closest friends don't know. Yesterday, I asked one of her closest friends, Larisa Mikhailov at Holy Transfiguration, but she has no idea what's going on. My sister Liz is friends with Maggie and has no idea. The attorney Maggie works for has no idea. All of them say it's weird. And I want to be clear that I made no promises to her that I broke. And to be completely honest, I was actually concerned about keeping a promise I made."

I explained to Father everything that happened with Maggie and her parents and that I had told her I wasn't going to make any permanent commitments before she and I had a chance to get to know each other.

"She knew I was dating," I continued, "though she didn't know any specifics. Meeting Lara changed things in my mind, and I've concluded I need someone who is 'cradle'."

"When did you decide that?"

"In the last day or so, after talking at length to Tasha and Clarissa."

"Did Elizaveta have something to do with that?"

"Only in the sense of making me realize that with the possible exception of Angie, I was probably mistaken to date girls outside the church. The commitments I have to make can only really be understood by someone who has been Orthodox for a long time, preferably for life."

"And Lara?"

I smiled, "I suppose you could say you could take the girl out of the Church, but not the Church out of the girl."

Father Nicholas laughed softly, "Despite her step-father's negative influence, she maintained her faith. Have you heard from her?"

"She's sent me postcards from each port of call, and they all say she's looking forward to seeing me when she returns. And then she and I will sit down and talk about the future, much the same way Tasha and I did."

"And Elizaveta?"

"Has made her position clear. She took me to task for bringing non-Orthodox girls to church rather than choosing a girl who was already Orthodox."

"An important point, as you've finally discovered," Father Nicholas said with a smile. "I think your experience with Angie colored your view such that you felt any girl would convert for you. Given your old timeframe of not marrying until

you were a Resident, that might have worked, though we discussed the problems with that kind of thinking when you were seeing Kimiko."

"What's your advice, Father?"

"To leave matchmaking to the matchmakers!" he declared with a grin.

"Even so, your thinking on the matter is important to me, as is Vladyka's."

"If you're asking me to choose between Lara and Elizaveta, I have to decline. If you're asking if either of them will make a suitable wife and matushka, I believe both of them would. And with that, we need to vest quickly, or we're going to be late!"

I chuckled, "Orthodox Non-Standard Time!"

There was a pattern in many churches of starting services late. That had happened innumerable times with Father Herman at Holy Transfiguration but never at Saint Michael.

"Not in THIS parish, Subdeacon!" Father Nicholas declared firmly.

We started Matins exactly on time, as we always did, and just about four hours later, when we finished serving the Divine Liturgy, I joined Clarissa and the teens and young adults for lunch. After lunch, I taught Sunday School, and then Clarissa and I headed back to campus to begin reviewing for the MCAT, something which would occupy at least three hours every night except Friday, as well as three or four hours each on Saturday and Sunday.

We went to my room and I wrote out a note which asked that we not be disturbed except in an emergency because we were studying for the MCAT. I

taped it to the door, then closed and locked the door, put on soft jazz, and sat down next to Clarissa and a pile of study guides and practice tests.

Four hours later, we wrapped up and joined Jocelyn and Dona for dinner in the cafeteria, and then the four of us hung out in my room until bedtime. As usual, Dona disappeared while I said my prayers, but came back to join me in bed for a couple of hours of 'slow dancing'.



June 27, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Wednesday afternoon my curiosity finally got the best of me, and I asked Grace to call Mr. Jacobs' office and ask for Maggie. She did, and when the secretary put her on hold, she hung up.

"She's there," Grace said. "Now what?"

"I have to decide if I'm going to go to the Elberts' and try to talk to her."

"Again, as someone with no dog in this fight, unless you intend to try to get back together with her, why?"

"To know what caused the problems and perhaps explain."

"To soothe your conscience? Because that's really all it would be, right? Let's assume it was all a big misunderstanding. Fine. You explain that. She apologizes and says she wants to keep seeing you. You tell her you aren't interested. How well is THAT going to go? You'll have exchanged one reason for her being pissed off for another. Then what will you do? Take her back to make her feel better? Because THAT will work out so well."

"You're right," I sighed. "It's basically a no-win scenario. Just like you playing chess!"

Grace's eyes narrowed, and her cheeks scrunched as she gave me an evil look.

"Now that's just low," she replied.

"And true," I replied smugly. "You haven't won yet!"

"Maybe I need an incentive!"

"Winning is its own incentive!"

"I was thinking something much more personal!"

"Unfortunately, the 'thrill of victory' will have to do."

"Bummer."

A customer came to the checkout, which meant we had to get back to work. Grace went back to doing one of our more tedious tasks -- checking for 'expired' products while I waited on the customer. We always did our best to rotate the stock on the shelves, but invariably, customers would rearrange the items to get the one with the furthest date rather than taking the item in front.

When the work day ended, I went back to campus to relax until it was time to leave for Vespers. Clarissa elected not to go, and Tasha preferred not to be early, so I headed to the church alone. When I arrived, I unlocked the doors, disarmed the alarm, then set about preparing for Vespers.

"Subdeacon Michael?"

I finished filling an oil lamp and then turned to greet Elizaveta's father.

"Good evening, Mr. Kozlov," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"Please, Subdeacon, call me Viktor Nikolayevich. I'm wondering if you would have lunch with me one day next week."

No matter what my plans for the future were, and no matter what I thought of Elizaveta, I couldn't really refuse a lunch request from the Parish Council president. He had also been the one to suggest to the bishop that I should be considered for ordination when Deacon Grigory had his first heart attack.

"I work, so it would have to be during my lunch break or on Saturday."

"Are you free this Saturday?"

"I am."

"Then we'll have lunch at the McKinley Country Club. I'm a member there. Do you play golf?"

"Only the mini-golf variety," I replied.

"I believe the regular kind is a normal pastime for doctors, so perhaps you should learn! But we'll start with lunch. Come to the club at noon on Saturday and tell the young man at the door you're my guest. The club is on Arch Street, west of town. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes. I drive past it on Route 50 when I drive to and from West Monroe, where my parents live."

"OK. See you Saturday, then."

I nodded and went back to filling the oil lamps. I suspected Elizaveta had said something to her dad and either requested he talk to me or he did so on his own, based on something she had said. Either way, I fully expected to have to discuss the situation with him. The problem was, I didn't exactly know what the situation was.

Lara wouldn't be home until July 5th, and even then, I wasn't sure how soon after she returned home we'd be able to see each other to talk face to face. Whatever was discussed with Mr. Kozlov would have to be done in such a way as to not cause trouble for either of the girls or for me.

After Vespers, I stopped for Chinese food and brought it back to the dorm so Clarissa and I could eat together while we were studying. We finished just before 11:00pm, and we left the dorm so I could walk her to Doctor Blahnik's house. I told her about Mr. Kozlov's invitation, which caused her to laugh and shake her head.

"I think I'll pop some popcorn!" she teased.

"You do realize it could be about something other than Elizaveta, right? Deacon Grigory was responsible for dealing with requests for financial or other help from the parish, and Viktor Nikolay'ich is the Parish Council President."

"And that's why he asked you to call him by his proper names? I'm actually surprised he didn't just go straight to 'Dad!'!"

"It *is* possible that it's about something else."

"You just keep telling yourself that, Petrovich! When does Lara come home?"

"July 5th," I replied.

"That reminds me -- are we going to Milton Lake for the Fourth?"

"I figured we would, with Jocelyn, Bill, Abby, and Dona."

"Triple date again Friday?"

"That works for me."

"And Mike?"

"Yes?"

"Grace is right. Don't try to see Maggie. If she comes to you, that's one thing. But don't try to see her. It can't end well."

"I know," I sighed.

Once we arrived at Doctor Blahnik's house, we hugged, and after Clarissa went inside, I turned and walked back to campus. When I stepped off the elevator on the second floor, I saw Dona waiting in the lounge. She got up, came over to me, and we hugged.

"Did you want me to spend the night?" she asked. "I wasn't sure, given how late it was."

"If you want to, yes. I do need to say my evening prayers."

"I'll just sit on the couch, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

We went into my room, I said my prayers, and then Dona and I got into bed for a couple of 'slow dances' before we fell asleep spooned together.



June 30, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday, Clarissa and I studied for a couple of hours after breakfast, then Dona and I went to play our usual round of mini-golf. When we got back to the dorm, I changed into white slacks, a royal blue dress shirt, and black loafers, then headed out to my car for the drive to the country club. Fifteen minutes later I walked in through the front door and was greeted by a guy about my age at a podium.

"Michael Loucks," I said. "I'm a guest of Viktor Nikolayevich Kozlov."

"Yes, Sir! He's expecting you. He's in the small private dining room. Go down this hallway to my right, make your first right, and the dining room is on the left. You'll know you're in the right place because you'll see a card with his name on it next to the door. Just go in."

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome. May I ask what you're driving?"

"A black '76 Ford Mustang Cobra II."

"Thanks. I won't need the plate number. I don't think I've seen another Mustang of that vintage here all Summer. Just go on down the hallway."

"Thanks."

I followed his directions and found the door, turned the knob, and went in.

"Ah, Subdeacon Michael! Welcome!"

"Hello, Viktor Nikolay'ich."

"Please sit. May I get you something to drink? A beer, perhaps?"

"Thank you, but I've decided to limit how much alcohol I drink. An ER doctor is always on call, and I don't want to risk having alcohol in my system. I decided it would be better to adopt that strategy now rather than behave like a typical college student!"

Mr. Kozlov laughed and nodded, "You don't strike me as a typical college student! And I believe that's a good strategy, though I do like a brandy after dinner and an ice-cold vodka, of course."

I smiled, "Of course!"

"Do you smoke? I don't recall you smoking at Pascha."

I shook my head, "No, I never did. And if I had, I think that after seeing what happened to Deacon Grigory, which Doctor Evgeni attributed to smoking and lack of exercise, I believe I'd quit."

"I had an uncle who died of lung cancer when I was nineteen. I quit smoking that very day and haven't touched a cigarette or cigar since."

A well-dressed waiter came into the room and handed both of us menus. I looked over the options and ordered the roast beef sandwich with 'au jus' on the side. The sandwich came with chips and a pickle, which was sufficient for me. I

also ordered a Coke. Mr. Kozlov ordered the 'House Club' sandwich, which came with the same sides. He ordered a beer to drink.

"I have two things I want to discuss with you, Subdeacon. The first is about the ministry for which Deacon Grigory, God bless his soul, was responsible with regards to distributing alms and responding to other requests. I have been handling that with the hope that Deacon Grigory would return, which, unfortunately, didn't happen. It belongs in the hands of a clergyman, and it falls to the deacon, or in this case, the subdeacon, to receive and approve requests. I've spoken to Father Nicholas, and he agrees you should handle this."

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to make those decisions," I replied.

"And you think I am?" he asked with a laugh. "At least you have the grace of ordination!"

"And I think that, and fifty cents, will get me a cup of coffee at Frisch's! I believe 'glorified acolyte' is the way Vladyka ARKADY has referred to it."

"Well, you are glorified, at least! But to be serious, the laying-on of hands and your stole are signs that God has given you the grace and wisdom to do this. I believe that. After all, I personally requested your ordination to the diaconate on behalf of the Parish Council."

"In league with my grandfather, no doubt," I replied with a smile.

"Mikhail Ivanovich may have said a word or two to me about it," he replied with a smile of his own.

"How do I do this?"

"With your heart, Subdeacon, but also with your brain. Be merciful and charitable but not gullible. Most people are honest, but there are always some who are not."

"What's the typical kind of request?"

"More often than not, for help with rent, car repairs, or medical bills. Food is usually handled by the ladies of the church by providing meals."

"I don't feel qualified, but obviously, I'll do it."

Mr. Kozlov smiled and nodded, "Good. The other matter is a bit more delicate. My daughter expressed an interest in you."

"She expressed that sentiment to me as well."

"I assumed so. This presents a problem."

"Only one?" I asked with a smile.

"Well, no," he replied with a laugh.

The waiter interrupted our conversation when he came into the private dining room with our food. He set it before us, ensured we had everything we needed, refilled our water glasses, and then left. At Mr. Kozlov's request, I gave the blessing, and then we began eating.

"The problem?" I prompted.

"The problem is actually mine, I think. I spoil my daughter, and she nearly always gets what she wants. In this case, I am basically powerless to give her what she wants. Of course, that didn't prevent her from asking!"

"А «бабушка» (*babushka*) in training!"

"Aren't all the young women in the Church?" he asked with a wry smile. "Well, at least the faithful ones, anyway. You were seeing Natalya Antonova, so I'm sure you know very well that's true! Would you tell me about that? Everyone simply assumed you two would marry."

"Before I answer, may I ask what you do for a living?"

"I'm a businessman. I started with the Ford dealership here in McKinley in the early 60s, and I've used the money I've made there to buy a number of other businesses, including two computer stores, a hardware store, two grocery stores, an electrical supply company, and a plumbing supply company. Except for the computer stores, I bought distressed businesses and turned them around to make them profitable. I've sold several and will sell some of the current ones and buy others. I also sit on the Board of Directors of Moore Memorial Hospital and serve as Vice President of the Country Club. Why?"

"I was curious whether you knew anything about the medical profession and the training involved."

"I spoke with Doctor Evgeni about it to add to what I know from the Hospital Board," he replied with a smile. "And I'm not spying; I'm doing what I call 'due diligence'. Do you know what that is?"

I nodded, "Investigating a business before you buy it. I remember that from the one business class I took in High School."

"And your relationship with Natalya Antonova?"

"After some very long, heart-to-heart talks, she concluded she would be very unhappy with the amount of attention I could pay to her for the next seven or eight years. She also wants to have children soon and was worried, too, about the amount of time I would have for children. I had planned to wait to have children until I've completed my Residency, but that's not something Tasha could contemplate. Once we talked through all of that, we concluded it was unwise to marry."

"A very mature decision. May I ask how you intend to pay for medical school? You don't have to answer, of course."

"For tuition? I'll borrow most of it, with my parents contributing a small amount. For living expenses, I've worked since I was fifteen, and I've saved quite a bit. I received some gifts as well, and based on all of that, I'll easily be able to support myself until I become a Resident and start getting paid. It's nearly impossible for medical students to work after they finish their second year."

"Yes, I'm aware. And if you were to have a family?"

"I would have to sit down and figure that out. I think it might be possible, but it would be a struggle unless my wife worked."

"Did you plan to live in the dormitory?"

"No. One of the professors at Taft offered me a room. I'd contribute to the household budget, though those costs would be significantly lower than the dorms. I'd be living there now if I weren't a Resident Advisor, which covers my room and board and pays a stipend."

"It seems you've thought things through quite thoroughly."

"Call it my 'due diligence'," I replied.

"Counting the cost before building the tower? That's very good."

"May I ask, then, what you propose to do about your problem?"

"A proposal would solve it!" he said with a laugh. "But I'm doing what I'm able to do right now by having lunch with you. Do you happen to know about the «Домострой» (*Domostroi*)?" ("*Domestic Order*")

I nodded, "My grandfather told me about it several years ago. It's a book on marriage and how to manage a household with advice on fasting, prayer, and so on. I believe it also suggested unwavering devotion to the Tsar."

"Whites' Mikhail Ivanovich and my own father may be, but I believe all of us understand the tsars were corrupt, though not nearly so corrupt as the «комиссары» (*комиссары*) or «аппаратчики» (*apparatchiki*) and the evil men in the «политбюро» (*politbyuro*). Anyway, I ask because that book includes instructions to set aside land and other goods for a daughter when she marries." ("*Commissars*", "*low-level bureaucrats*", "*Politburo*")

I laughed, "Somehow, I think if Elizaveta knew you offered a dowry, she'd be VERY unhappy!"

He laughed as well and shrugged, "She told her mother and me about the points she made about the cottage we have on our property. I wanted to add to what my daughter said, but I don't want you to be upset or offended, and if you are, please hold me responsible, not her. We could certainly help you financially if you see fit to grant my daughter's request."

He was basically offering what Katy's parents had when she and I had discussed moving in together. They had offered to rent us a place and help us financially, but I wasn't ready, at that point, to make the commitment to marry, and I was

also uneasy with Katy giving up on Stanford. This situation was different in a number of ways, and it certainly held some attraction. But it wasn't something to which I could commit immediately.

"And save your life?" I chuckled.

"The thought had crossed my mind!" he replied with a laugh. "I'm glad to see you can find humor in that and that you aren't upset."

"Given the circumstances, I don't have a philosophical problem with it, and I don't see it as a bribe, if that's what worried you. It's simply one more piece of information in my calculation, if you will. But there are other concerns, obviously. The first of which is that Elizaveta doesn't turn eighteen until April of '87."

"I'm sure you're aware, because of Alexandra Antonova, that there are remedies which would permit your ordination in the timeframe the bishop desires, and as we as a Parish Council requested."

"And you're OK with that?" I asked.

"She's going to marry, of that I'm certain. If this comes to pass, my hair and beard will remain black instead of turning white, as I won't have to worry about her dating!"

"What about college?" I asked.

"My daughter has no desires other than to be a wife and mother. My own wife, Yulia, and my mother-in-law were also very happy wives and mothers. My son, Gennady, will come into business with me when he graduates from Harvard in a year. My second son, Iosif, well, he's too busy drinking and chasing loose women at UCLA for me to know what he plans to do."

"I met Gennady at Christmas," I said. "But I don't recall seeing Iosif."

"He doesn't go to church and hasn't since about age sixteen. Girls, cars, and other things were far more exciting to him. You seem to have made it through High School and most of college without falling into the trap so many of our youth do."

"Not without serious struggle," I replied.

"We fall down, we get up, we move forward. The most important thing is to stay faithful."

"One last question, if I may."

"Certainly," he replied.

"Are you sure this would be what is best for your daughter? And that she truly understands what she's getting into?"

"As for the former, who's to say? You'll be a doctor and a deacon; you are a faithful, trustworthy, caring young man. I certainly can't think of a better choice for a husband in the parish or even at the Cathedral. It might be a bit sooner than I had expected, but as a businessman, I know the importance of seizing opportunity when it presents itself. As for understanding, I'll simply say she spent considerable time speaking with both Matushka Anastasia and Matushka Natalya about what it's like to be married to a clergyman and to Doctor Evgeni's wife, Maria, about what it's like to be married to a doctor."

"So she did HER due diligence," I replied.

"Very much so, including talking to her mother about this before she approached you. And, as my daughter said, she has all the necessary skills to keep a home."

"And your thoughts about how to proceed if that's my decision?"

"For propriety, you probably couldn't date, so I'd suggest the traditional courting. Come to dinner, spend time with Elizaveta under the supervision of her mother and grandmothers, and decide if you agree with her assessment that she would make a good wife for you."

"For the next couple of weeks, my time is very limited because my friend Clarissa and I are studying for the MCAT. Once that's done, then I'd like to come to dinner. There is one important thing of which you should be aware. Just before the last semester ended, I started seeing Larisa Sergeyevna Federova from Duquesne, Pennsylvania."

"Her father is Sergei Federov?"

"Yes."

"His father and my father are friends, which I'm sure doesn't surprise you."

"Not given the fact that my grandfather seems to know every Russian man over the age of 40 in the Midwest! And quite a few elsewhere as well."

"Mine as well," Mr. Kozlov replied. "But you know fathers and grandfathers stay out of these kinds of things."

"As you are now?" I asked with a grin.

He laughed, "I meant situations with two young women competing for the same young man. That we leave to the «бабушки» (*babushki*). Come to dinner, get to

know Elizaveta, let her make her case, and decide. I won't pressure you, nor will I say anything to Vladyka about your decision one way or the other."

"Thank you. I'll speak to you after July 13th. That's when I take the MCAT."

"Good. Now, let's finish our lunch and get to know each other better."

XI. One Condition

June 30, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I was right!" I said when I arrived at Doctor Blahnik's house after lunch with Mr. Kozlov.

"No way!"

"He asked me to take responsibility for the distribution of charity to individuals and families in need. He's been doing it temporarily because of Deacon Grigory's heart attack. As he said, it does belong with clergy and typically falls to the deacon."

"Good call, Petrovich."

"He did have a second matter to discuss," I grinned, "so, actually, we were both right."

"I knew it!" Clarissa declared triumphantly. "So?"

"He offered a significant dowry," I grinned.

"If you considered that for even a half-second, you're a bigger pig than I could ever have imagined!"

"Actually, it wasn't anything more than what Katy's parents offered when we discussed living together. And it simply confirmed what Elizaveta implied when she mentioned the cottage at her parents' house."

"And?"

"He invited me to dinner, but I put him off until after the MCAT. That gives me a chance to talk with Lara and see what she thinks."

"Does he know about her?"

I grinned, "Small world, as usual. Elizaveta's grandfather and Lara's grandfather are friends. Mr. Kozlov didn't say, but I'm sure he knows Lara's dad, even if they aren't friends."

"Open warfare!" Clarissa exclaimed giddily. "One bowl of popcorn won't be enough!"

"Don't get your hopes up, Lissa! I'm expecting to see Lara before I have dinner with the Kozlovs, so I'll have a better idea how to handle things."

"It's interesting -- two girls who are very much the same but with one very important difference."

"The career woman versus the homemaker?" I asked.

"Which side of Mike Loucks controls the situation -- his traditional, conservative Russian self or his modern, American self?"

"I'm not sure that's exactly right," I replied. "Lara is traditionally Russian and conservative. Being a school teacher is an extremely common career for clergy wives. Remember, too, my traditional, conservative Russian mom went back to work when Liz started kindergarten, and my grandmother watched us during the afternoon."

"Then I suppose it's outgoing versus demure."

I chuckled, "Because Elizaveta accosting me about not asking her out and making a good case for herself is not aggressive or anything like that! Including offering sex in a round-about way."

Clarissa smirked, "'Figuring out how to make babies' being the euphemism for wanting you to ravish her?"

"In that sense, she's demure, but if you compare her with the way the other women at church present themselves, she fits right in."

"I'm curious. If Lara tells you she's ready to make a commitment, does that put an end to everything else?"

I nodded, "I believe it would, yes. I would say she is in control at the moment."

"And you're OK with that?"

"Very much so."



July 4, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Wednesday morning, Dona stretched and yawned when I got out of bed.

"Mind if I stay?" she asked.

"Not at all. There's nothing planned for today until we head to Milton Lake around 1:00pm."

I didn't have to work, as the Quick Mart was only open a half-day, and Nancy had offered to work my usual shift. I knew she needed the money, so I agreed because it meant I could spend the entire day with my friends.

I pulled on my running clothes, gave Dona a quick kiss, and then headed out of the dorm. As I began my run, I thought about how the Summer had developed. Despite my angst over the situation with Maggie, everything else was going smoothly. Jocelyn, Clarissa, and I were growing even closer, Dona and I were getting along great, Grace and I worked together and played chess, and there was no drama with my sister, at least so far.

Lara was supposed to arrive home in the next day or so, and I expected her to call. I hoped I could see her before my dinner with the Kozlovs, as then I'd have a much better idea where things stood. It was entirely possible I'd cancel the dinner if things went a certain way. That development would also mean an end to Dona sharing my bed, but that was going to happen sometime in August, no matter what happened with Lara.

I finished my run and headed back into the dorm. Dona was lying in bed with the comforter pulled up to her waist and her lovely breasts on display. I walked over to her, gave her a kiss, then stripped off my running clothes so I could take a shower.

"I don't mind you being sweaty, and you'd only have to take one shower," Dona said as I turned on the spray.

I quickly turned off the spray, walked over to the bed, got a rubber from the nightstand, and got into bed next to her. After a bit of foreplay, I rolled on the condom, moved on top of Dona, and slid slowly into her.

"Fuck me?" she requested breathlessly.

I nodded, and fifteen minutes later, she was sweaty as well, and we both were satisfied. After carefully pulling out and disposing of the rubber, I got into the shower. Once I was clean, Dona got in, and after I dried and dressed, I said my morning prayers while Dona showered. When I had completed my prayers, Dona and I left the room to join Jocelyn and Clarissa at Tasha's apartment for breakfast, as the cafeteria was closed. Abby was waiting outside the Quick Mart and climbed the stairs with us. Tasha greeted us and invited us inside.

She'd set up a card table and folding chairs to accommodate us, as her dinette table could only seat four, and even that was tight. She poured coffee or tea for everyone, then took plates of waffles, scrambled eggs, and toast from the oven, and a bowl of mixed fruit from the fridge and set them on the table. She asked me to pray, and once I had, we began serving ourselves.

"Is Nikolas going to join us today?" Clarissa asked Tasha.

"Yes," Tasha replied. "He'll meet us at the park at 1:00pm. Mischa, what about Grace?"

"She'll be there," I replied. "She's bringing her friend Jim. And she took pains to say 'friend'."

"Is there church tonight?" Dona asked.

"No," I replied. "Father Nicholas canceled services because so many people are celebrating Independence Day. He and his family will be at Milton Lake tonight."

"Does he wear his cassock to things like that?"

"The OCA wants all its priests to wear their cassocks at all times when they're out of the house unless their work precludes doing so. For deacons, it's a bit more lax, though they wear them if they're visiting Orthodox households. Some

deacons choose to wear their cassocks at all times, but neither Deacon Vasily nor Deacon Grigory wore their cassocks when they were working. Father Herman usually wears his cassock when he's out, but not always."

"What do they do for work?" Dona asked. "Or did, for the deacon from your current church."

"Tasha's dad is a pharmacist, Father Herman is a property inspector, and Deacon Grigory was an insurance adjuster. Father Nicholas doesn't work because Saint Michael the Archangel is large enough to pay him a reasonable salary. Holy Transfiguration is too small to do that. They pay a tax-free housing allowance and a small monthly salary. He earns the rest via his work. And that's not uncommon for smaller parishes."

"What about deacons? Are they paid?"

"As a rule, no," I replied. "There are instances where they receive a small stipend from the parish, but that's usually only in the largest parishes. The one exception is the protodeacon at the Cathedral, who is the bishop's main assistant. The bishop also has a subdeacon who volunteered to travel with him, but that subdeacon is going to seminary next month."

"I'm curious," Dona asked, "but how does that work with you being a doctor and needing to be at church?"

"In my first year of Residency, it's going to be whenever I can be there for services. After that, I'll arrange my shifts to accommodate church as best I can. That'll probably mean taking some less desirable shifts so I can have Saturday evening and Sunday morning free. I'll likely use a week of vacation for Holy Week. For other services, I'd have to trade shifts. Once I'm an Attending, it'll be easier, but that's years down the road."

"That sounds less than ideal."

I shrugged, "Given that I'd try to arrange my shifts so I could go to church, it really isn't any different from what I'd do anyway. But I think you're getting an idea of why Tasha felt she wouldn't be happy."

"Not to be negative," Dona said, "but will ANY girl be happy with that situation?"

"A very special one," Tasha interjected. "And from what I've seen of Lara and what I know of Elizaveta, they'll be able to deal with it."

"I think Angie could have," Clarissa said. "But because of her condition, I can't say positively."

"She could have," I replied. "She basically became Orthodox and conformed to the praxis overnight. And her belief has remained intensely strong even though all her problems."

"You're going to see her in about a week, right?" Jocelyn asked.

"Yes. We'll go to Cincinnati Thursday of next week after work and take the MCAT on Friday. We'll visit Angie on Friday evening, and then on Saturday morning, I'm going to see Doctor Mercer. We'll have dinner with my sister and Paul on Saturday evening."

"When does the bovine excrement hit the rotating air circulation device?" Jocelyn asked.

Tasha laughed, "You can ask 'When does the shit hit the fan?' in front of me when it's just this group!"

"A week from Sunday," I said. "Liz and I will go to dinner at my parents' house."

"That's going to be interesting," Jocelyn said.

"The way being, say, near Shima Surgical Clinic at 8:15am on August 6, 1945, was interesting," I replied.

"From the date, I'm guessing that was an atomic bomb?" Clarissa asked.

"Hiroshima," I replied. "That clinic wasn't the primary target, but the wind caused the bomb to drift before it detonated."

"That bad?" Dona asked. "Why?"

"I haven't told you the story because it's long and ugly, but the short version is this is about a guy my sister had an affair with, for which he pled guilty to statutory rape. He's out now, and she's getting back together with him. My parents will not be happy."

"He referenced the atomic bombing for a reason," Jocelyn said. "His dad, specifically, will lose his mind. His mom will be extremely upset, too, but will calm down fairly quickly, or so we hope."

"My job is to keep my dad from going nuclear," I said. "And to quickly bring my mom back to earth."

"How?" Dona asked.

"Using my mom's own tactics against her!" I replied. "Basically, talking to her until she sees my point of view. Lord knows she did that often enough to me growing up!"

"Most of Mike's personality traits come from his mom," Jocelyn said. "Though with a Y chromosome, the usual 'boy' limitations apply!"

All the girls laughed.

"I love you, too, Jos!" I said with a grin.

"What are we doing after breakfast?" Clarissa asked.

"Me and five girls?" I smirked. "I can think of a few things!"

"PIG!" Tasha, Clarissa, and Jocelyn exclaimed simultaneously.

"Who? Me?" I asked innocently. "I was thinking mini golf or bowling!"

"You were NOT!" Jocelyn retorted.

"Is this normal?" Abby asked.

"This is tame," Clarissa replied. "He's behaving because you're here. And it's all teasing because Petrovich would never try to interfere with any of our relationships."

"I take it you clued her in on all the possible names for me?"

"Including «ГОВНЮК» (*govnyuk*)!" Clarissa replied with a smirk. "Yep!"

Tasha and I both laughed, but Dona looked confused, and Jocelyn just rolled her eyes.

"Shithead," I said.

"Though not so much now as before," Clarissa said.

"Thanks, I think," I deadpanned.

We finished breakfast, and I helped Tasha clean up while the other girls began preparing the coolers with our food for the afternoon and evening. Clarissa had a cooler of soft drinks at Doctor Blahnik's house, and we'd pick that up on our way to the lake. When everything was ready, we decided to head to Milton Lake early.

We took my car and Tasha's car, stopping at Doctor Blahnik's house as planned, and then drove to the lake. We were early enough that we had our pick of spots and chose an area which would be shaded by a small stand of trees but which also provided a clear view over the lake where the fireworks would be displayed. Nikolas, Bill, Grace, and Jim all arrived as planned, and we made introductions for those who didn't know each other.

"Jim taught me to work on cars," Grace said. "I needed to change the oil, and he taught me, and we took it from there."

"So you got to play with his dipstick?" I teased.

Grace laughed, "It was MY car."

I saw Nikolas tense and heard him whisper something to Tasha and realized that I'd just screwed up big time. I could make jokes like that in private, but not in public, where the congregation might hear me and take offense.

"Actually, I need to apologize for the coarse jesting," I said.

"Oh, please!" Grace said with a laugh. "It was a good joke!"

"But inappropriate for Subdeacon Michael," Tasha said firmly.

I nodded my agreement and saw Nikolas visibly relax. I knew that I'd need to raise what had just happened with Father Nicholas in confession, and soon, so that it didn't come back to him from Nikolas beforehand. I suspected Tasha would be able to keep Nikolas 'onside', but I couldn't take the chance. And I had to remind myself to be very careful.

I decided the best thing to do was go wade in the lake and let Tasha talk to Nikolas if necessary. I stripped off my T-shirt, shorts, shoes, and socks, leaving only my bathing trunks. Dona did the same, revealing a pink bikini that showed off her wonderful figure. We went down to the water and waded in.

"What was that about?" she asked. "That was totally tame!"

"I know," I replied. "But you know my role at church, and I have to behave a certain way in public."

"Is he going to have a cow about my bikini?"

I shook my head, "No. If you were my wife, then I'd have suggested a modest one-piece, but it wouldn't be required."

Dona laughed and shook her head, "As good as the sex is, there is no way I could put up with all that religious stuff. Are you going to get in trouble?"

"No. I'll talk to the priest about it. So long as I acknowledge that I messed up, the fact that I apologized immediately will be the end of it. A repeat incident would be a problem, though."

"But this morning..."

"I've known Tasha for a long time, and she can be just as «некультурный» (*nekulturny*) as I can, but only in private."

"What's that word?"

"It means uncouth or uncultured, and it's a normal Russian way to say someone is deviating from social norms."

"So you have to be a totally different person in public?"

"We all do that, to an extent," I replied. "How you talk to your best friend versus how you talk to your mom and dad or how you talk to your sister or how you talk to teachers."

"I hadn't thought about it that way, but that does make sense. There are things I can't say around my mom that I'd say to Shelly or Trish. Those are two of the girls I hung around with the most back home. Will he flip out if I kiss you?"

"No, because I'm not in my cassock. If I were, it would be completely inappropriate."

"And you're OK with that?"

I shrugged, "It's what I've known since I was little, so it's basically second nature. It's like knowing what to do at each point during the church service. I've lived it from birth, and it's effectively automatic at this point."

"You're the first really religious person I ever got to know very well, so this is all new to me."

"Most people aren't as hardcore as I am!"

"You didn't say what you thought of the bikini."

"I'd say every single guy who sees you in it is going to be jealous of me and want to get your phone number!"

She smiled, "Thanks. Do you think there's any way I could get on your floor this year?"

"We can ask Clarissa. She works in the Bursar's office and would know who to talk to in Student Housing. For next year, talk to Jocelyn because Clarissa and I are graduating, and she'll need a new roommate."

"Already done!"

"Cool. Then ask Clarissa to see what she can find out for you."

"Will do!"

We waded out of the water, dried off, and laid on our towels to get some sun, which would darken Dona's tan and make the contrast with the areas covered by her bikini even starker, something I found incredibly sexy. When we'd been in the Sun long enough, we moved to the blankets in the shade and got a couple of Cokes from the cooler.

We had a great afternoon, playing Frisbee, wading in the lake, eating, and hanging out. At one point, when just Clarissa, Abby, Dona, and I were together, Abby asked about what had happened.

"It's really a matter of decorum," I said.

"He reacted like it was a sin," Abby said. "And to be honest, I agree with Lazarus Long on that one -- *'Sin lies only in hurting other people unnecessarily. All other 'sins' are invented nonsense. (Hurting yourself is not sinful -- just stupid).'*"

"I could actually agree with that," I said, "with the caveat that hurt can be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. All of those can injure someone."

"And earlier?"

"'Coarse jesting' is considered a sin because it's offensive," I replied. "But you've heard me talk that way in private. As I explained to Dona earlier, it's a matter of behaving differently based on context."

"I suppose. And my situation?"

I shrugged, "I am in no position to judge."

"I told you," Clarissa said gently. "He's not going to say a negative word. He loves me, and that's the end of the discussion."

"But his church teaches that it's sinful, right?"

I smiled, "My church teaches a lot of things that are sinful. When I achieve sinless perfection, I'll worry about other people. I don't expect that to occur in my lifetime."

"But Tasha's friend?"

I shrugged, "Will answer for being judgmental, if he actually was, as opposed to just being offended by the silly joke."

"Abby," Clarissa said. "I told you, Mike isn't like any Christian you've probably met. He won't preach. He'll just do his best to live his life according to the precepts he's been taught and answer questions. I told you he was the first person I came out to. He loved me enough to stand with me when I told my parents and took care of me when they kicked me out."

"Sorry," Abby replied. "I guess I'm just used to being treated badly by religious people."

"The blame is on Christians," I said. "We ought to be better."

She smiled and nodded, and the conversation ended because the others returned. We had more to eat and drink and more time together, including listening to music from the distant bandshell while waiting for the Sun to set. The fireworks display began about thirty minutes after sundown and was as awesome as usual, with lots of skyrockets and aerial bombs. When the display finished, we gathered our things and headed back to town. Dona and I took showers before we got into bed, then had a pair of 'slow dances' before we fell asleep in each other's arms.



July 5, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Hi, Mike!" Lara exclaimed when I answered the phone on Thursday evening.

"Hi, Lara!" I responded. "How was your trip?"

"*Our cue to leave,*" Jocelyn said quietly to Clarissa and Dona.

The three of them got up and left the room, with Clarissa pulling the door shut behind them.

"Great!" Lara replied. "I'll tell you all about it when I see you."

"When?" I asked.

"If you wanted, I could drive to McKinley tomorrow and stay for a few days."

"I'd like that. You can use my room at Doctor Blahnik's house."

"Making no assumptions and taking no risks?"

"I suspect we have a lot to talk about first," I said.

"Very true. Did you take the MCAT?"

"A week from tomorrow," I said. "Clarissa and I have been studying. And yes, I'll have plenty of time for you!"

"I could wait if you wanted. I don't want you to mess up your test scores."

"I'll be fine."

"How are things at home?"

"That disaster is percolating until the 22nd."

"That's when Liz is going to drop the bomb on your parents?"

"Yes."

"All I can say is 'good luck'. How is Sasha?"

"She and the baby are doing great. She married Yaroslav about two weeks ago. Also, Deacon Grigory reposed about three weeks ago."

"Lord have mercy! Another heart attack?"

"Yes."

"That's too bad. I assume Jocelyn arrived safely?"

"Yes. And Tasha moved as well."

"Cool! What about your other friend?"

"We're not seeing each other."

"Wow! That was fast! Because of me?"

"Partly. We can talk about that when you're here. I'm off work at 4:00pm, so any time after that would be good to show up. Then I don't work until Monday."

"OK. I plan to arrive at about 5:00pm. Where?"

"Just drive to Doctor Blahnik's house. I take it you remember where it is?"

Lara laughed, "How could I forget the place where I was so very expertly deflowered?"

"I'm really looking forward to seeing you," I said.

"Me, too! See you about 5:00pm tomorrow!"

We said 'goodbye', I pressed the switchhook and dialed Doctor Blahnik's house. When she answered I verified it was OK for Lara to stay there for two nights. Doctor Blahnik instantly agreed and asked the question I knew was coming.

"Are you staying, too?"

"No. We're working on our long-term relationship, and that would interfere right now."

"You're a very strange man, Mike," she teased. "But that also makes you very interesting."

"Thanks! I'll see you tomorrow between 4:00pm and 5:00pm."

"You're welcome!"

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then walked over to open the door to my room. The girls came back, and I let them know Lara would be visiting and that she'd be staying at Doctor Blahnik's house. I could tell that both Dona and Clarissa had questions, but neither of them asked. We enjoyed the rest of our evening, and I walked Clarissa to Doctor Blahnik's house.

"And?" she asked.

"I purposefully avoided that topic, as did she. It's one of those things that has to be done face-to-face."

"What does your gut say?"

"She sounded happy and eager to come see me. I could read that either way, but I think it's positive."

"Does that mean you and Dona have to end things?"

"I won't know until I talk to Lara. Remember, she wasn't bothered by me tying up loose ends."

"But this is a new one, Petrovich."

"A reasonable point. I do plan to ask Dona to sleep in her own room tomorrow night and Saturday night. She knew Lara was going to visit at some point, so it won't come as a surprise."

"There's a real possibility that tonight could be your last time before you marry."

I nodded, "That's entirely possible."

"And you're OK with that? Truly OK?"

"Yes, I am. But you could be jumping the gun. Let's allow this to play out."

We arrived at Doctor Blahnik's house, exchanged a loving hug, and when she was safely inside, I turned to walk back to campus. I thought about what I would say to Dona, but also what I would want to do if this were, indeed, the last time I'd sleep with her. In the end, I felt I had to leave it up to her, as I was, in effect, cutting her off from regular sex rather than the other way around.

When I arrived back at the dorm, Jocelyn had left, and Dona was sitting on the couch in my room. I shut the door, flipped the Chicago album, which was just finishing, and sat down next to Dona.

"I probably should sleep in my own room tomorrow and Saturday," she suggested. "I don't want to mess things up."

"That would probably be best, and I appreciate you understanding. There is, though, one possibility you need to consider."

"What's that?"

"If Lara tells me unequivocally 'yes', then tonight would have to be the last time you and I sleep together."

"You'd ask her to marry you?"

I chuckled, "That already happened, but not in the traditional way or with the traditional meaning. So, technically, no, but we'd be working directly towards marriage, discussing in detail exactly what we both expect, and so on, and eventually go to pre-marital counseling. It would be pretty lousy to be sleeping with another girl in that kind of situation. Almost like cheating, or if not, then trying to eat my cake and have it, too."

"Isn't it the other way around?"

"It actually makes more sense the way I said it -- you can't eat your cake and expect to still have it available."

"It does," Dona replied. "What are the chances this would be our last night together?"

"I'm not sure because I don't know what's going to happen, but it's quite possible. And given that I'd be the one putting a stop to it, I feel I need to leave it up to you what you want to do tonight if anything."

"If anything?"

"Some girls might be upset about what amounts to a breakup. I would never presume."

Dona laughed, "Our relationship is about sex, right?"

"Is it? Really?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You can't spend as much time together as we have without some kind of feelings developing. I'm not talking about being in love or anything like that, but it's not pure sex. Is it?"

"No, I suppose not. I like being with you, and not just the sex. And it's the same for you, too."

"Exactly. That is why this will be like a breakup, whether it's in the next day or two or at the end of Summer session. And that means I can't, in good conscience, presume anything."

"Because you care about me more than just as a good lay."

"Correction," I said with a huge grin, "you're a GREAT lay! And yes, I do care about you more than that."

"Why don't we start with a slow dance."

"Sounds good."

"A real slow dance," Dona said with a smile. "Put on *Lost in Love*, and we'll dance. Each time the song changes, we take off a piece of clothing. We kiss the whole time, all the way through both sides of the album."

I nodded and went to the stereo. I removed the Chicago album and replaced it with *Lost in Love*. When the title track began playing, I took Dona into my arms. She put her head on my chest, and we began swaying to the music. When the title track gave way to *All Out of Love*, we both removed our T-shirts, then moved together, this time, though, kissing as we swayed to the music.

With *Every Woman in the World*, I slipped off my shorts while Dona removed her bra. We embraced and began kissing as her hard nipples traced patterns across my chest. When *Just Another Woman* started, I slipped off my briefs and was naked. Dona smirked and pulled off both her shorts and panties. As we danced and kissed, her pubic hair tickled my erection, which was rubbing against her mons and stomach. We continued dancing and kissing through *Having You Near Me*, and then it was time to flip the album.

"Flip the album, and then I want you to fuck me," Dona whispered.

I flipped the album, and as *American Hearts* began playing, we moved to the bed. I got a rubber from the drawer, used my tongue to make sure Dona was sufficiently wet, rolled on the rubber, moved up, kissed Dona, and slid into her. She wrapped her arms and legs around me, and we proceeded to do our best to fuck each other senseless. Fifteen minutes later, after four orgasms for Dona, I filled the rubber with an orgasm that made my head spin.

"Put on *The One That You Love*," Dona requested between heavy breaths.

I carefully pulled out, disposed of the rubber, changed the album as she requested, then got back in bed.

"Sixty-nine," Dona said, "then me on top, then from behind, then in the chair. Can you go more than five times?"

I chuckled, "I can try."

"Then the sixth time, do whatever you want. In the morning, a slow dance after you run."

"I'll do my best!" I replied.



July 6, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

Dona was waiting in my bed when I returned to my room after my morning run on Friday.

"Got enough energy for that slow dance?"

"I think I might need a bit of encouragement, but yes, I think so."

"Then come over here and let me encourage you!"

Dona gave me very good encouragement, and we had a slow dance, after which I showered and dressed. Dona showered and dressed while I did my morning prayers. When I finished, I grabbed some Pop-Tarts, kissed Dona, and headed to the Quick Mart for work.

The day seemed to drag on forever because I was anticipating Lara's arrival. When 4:00pm finally rolled around, I turned the store over to Nancy and headed to Doctor Blahnik's house to wait for the last hour. When I arrived, nobody was home, and after making sure my room was straightened, I sat on the porch.

Just before 5:00pm, a cherry-red Corvette pulled up in front of the house and parked along the curb. I stood up as Lara got out, grabbed a bag from the passenger seat, closed and locked the door, and came up the walk to the porch.

"Nice car," I said with a grin.

We hugged and exchanged a soft kiss, then I took her by the hand and led her into the house and up to my room.

"Returning to the scene of the crime!" she laughed, tossing her bag on the bed.
"What's the plan?"

"Tonight, just you and me. I'll make us dinner, and we can talk. Tomorrow morning or afternoon, there's time for you to talk with Clarissa, Jocelyn, or Tasha if you want, and after Vespers, dinner with them. Church on Sunday morning. I got the RA on Rickenbacker 1 to cover for me both nights, though that's just so I have flexibility."

"Presenting me to YOUR assembled team of «бабушки» (*babushki*) for inspection?" she asked with an impish smile.

"You've met two of the three, and everyone knows Tasha is in charge!"

"For now!" Lara said, winking. "Anyway, all teasing aside, where are you sleeping?"

"To be determined. Shall we go make dinner?"

"Sure!"

As we left the room, I heard the front door open, and Clarissa called out 'hello'. I called back, and Lara and I went down the stairs. The girls hugged, and then Clarissa and I hugged.

"I have a date and need to get ready," Clarissa said. "Talk tomorrow morning?"

"Sure!" Lara agreed.

Clarissa went to the guest room, and Lara and I went to the kitchen. While I got the ingredients from the fridge shelf that was reserved for Clarissa and me, as well as things I needed from the pantry shelf, which was also reserved, Lara told me about her cruise. It sounded exciting, not to mention expensive, and she seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed it. Partway through, Clarissa had come in to say 'goodbye', and I'd told Lara about Abby.

We had a nice, fasting meal, then cleaned up the kitchen. I made a pitcher of lemonade, and we took it and a pair of glasses to the backyard. I poured us each a glass, set the pitcher on the table, and then Lara and I sat together on a wooden bench swing.

"Where do you want to start?" I asked.

"At the end, and then we can talk about it."

"OK," I said apprehensively.

Lara laughed softly, "Relax, Mike! After I said that, I realized how it might have sounded. But I think it makes more sense to do it that way."

"Go on," I replied.

"The answer is -- I think so."

"But you aren't sure?"

"I'm sure enough that I want to really get to know you, your friends, your family, and experience what life will be like with church, studying, and so on. I know it's going to get worse in the future, but I think I can get a good taste of it now. If you think about it, we had less than two months together. Is that something you can work with?"

"Yes," I replied. "If you think about it, right up to the betrothal ceremony, it's a process of getting to know each other, ensuring compatibility, and working towards a common future. Many things could interrupt that, even for a couple who were madly in love."

"You and Tasha?"

"I think I'd call that 'madly in lust'," I chuckled. "If you want 'in love', I think it really has to be April. Jocelyn and I never 'fell in love', so to speak."

"Nor you and Clarissa."

"True."

"First question -- tell me about the *real* competition."

"The girl I mentioned from back home dropped out just as I had decided that she wasn't really a viable candidate, so to speak."

"Why?"

"Why did she drop out? Or why did I change my mind?"

"I'm FAR more interested in your thinking than in some random High School girl's thinking."

I chuckled, "She's more than a year older than you are!"

"On her birth certificate? Sure. But otherwise? Not a chance!"

"A good point. Basically, it came down to two things -- the spark that had been there died out, and the realization that I needed someone 'cradle'. Well, with the exception that Angie could have fulfilled that condition despite not having been born Orthodox."

"Ignoring the self-promotion for a moment, I believe that's probably true. Not about Angie, because I don't know her, but without a strong, long-term foundation in the faith, what you're asking is a heck of a gamble, both for you and the girl. Honestly, and I think other things make up for this, the fact I've been away from the church for more than ten years is something you have to consider."

I smiled, "I did. When I was talking to Tasha right after I introduced the two of you, she said she liked you and noted you had been away from church for a long time. I responded by saying that while that was true, you immediately adapted to my fasting rule without any fuss, chose to go to church without me prompting you to do so, and haven't said or done anything which gives me pause. Add in Father Nicholas receiving you back by confession, and I'd say you easily meet that test."

"So, who's the other person then? I mean, assuming they don't invent a pill that changes sexual orientation overnight?"

"We know that isn't going to happen, and to be honest, I'm not sure I'd love a 'straight' Clarissa if that makes sense."

"In a strange way, it does."

"Elizaveta from church would be the other real possibility."

"There are 'unreal' possibilities?"

"Same thing as with Clarissa -- a pill which cured Angie would make me have to consider her, both because of, and in spite of, everything that happened."

"I think that might be a bit of guilt, don't you?"

"Probably," I replied. "But if we can't be open and honest with each other, this is a fool's errand, and we should give up now."

"Very true. The girl at church? She's aware of me?"

"She took me to task for basically discounting the girls at Saint Michael and complaining that I kept bringing non-Orthodox girls to church. That's what got me thinking about the 'cradle' issue, and when I raised it with Tasha, she confirmed my thinking."

"Because she's firmly in the 'Elizaveta Is The Wife' camp?"

"Actually, no. She's probably neutral and could easily go for 'Lara Is The Wife,'" I grinned. "In fact, I'd say all three members of my personal «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*) are basically neutral. Clarissa said she was going to pop popcorn!"

"Of COURSE she did," Lara said with a laugh. "I suppose, given that I'm unable to make a firm commitment at the moment, the best approach is for you to act as you see fit. But there has to be one condition."

"What's that?"

"If you won't sleep with ME, then you don't sleep with anyone. And I mean that in the euphemistic way."

I nodded, "I had assumed that would be a condition. I agree."

Lara smiled, "Then we can begin."

XII. MCAT

July 7, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Jocelyn Mills," I said, "please meet Laura Sera Bragg, also known as Larisa Sergeyevna Federova. Lara, Jocelyn Mills, my friend since kindergarten."

"I'm so sorry for you, Jocelyn," Lara said, clearly suppressing a smile.

"I know, right?" Jocelyn replied, a similar struggle obvious on her face.

"You two are absolutely hilarious," I deadpanned. "*Clarissa* loves me!"

"Come on, Petrovich, let these two «культурный» (*kulturny*)," she smirked, "women get to know each other!" ("well-behaved")

I smiled and shook my head, then let Clarissa lead me out the front door of the Blahnik's house. We walked along the sidewalk hand-in-hand.

"Where did you sleep last night?"

"In my room at the dorm," I replied.

"You must have come back early then."

"I did. I didn't go back to the dorm until about 1:30am. This morning, I ran, prayed, and then came over."

"And?"

"And it's a work in progress. Her basic take is that she thinks this could work, and we need to actually work on it when she comes back to school. We only had a couple of months, and there was a lot of other stuff going on."

"So, no commitment?"

"Not yet."

"What about Elizaveta?"

"I talked to Lara about Elizaveta, and Lara's position is that short of a commitment, I'm free to act as I see fit, albeit with the condition of not being intimate with anyone if I'm not going to be intimate with her."

"Good call on that one, Petrovich."

"Given the circumstances, I think I have to be chaste for now. Fundamentally, once I go to dinner at Elizaveta's house, I would be expected to not behave in any way that could be called «некультурный» (*nekulturny*). This also lets me get myself into the right state of mind AND behavior for ordination."

("inappropriate")

"And removes any doubt about what you and Lara might be doing from Father Nicholas' mind."

"Basically, it protects all of us. If all three of us go to confession and say there is nothing going on in that regard, then it sets Father's mind at ease."

"But can you handle it?"

"Yes. Lara did put it in an interesting way -- she forbade sex, but not sleeping in the same bed with someone."

Clarissa smiled, "Looking out for *my* best interest. How much did you tell her about Abby?"

"Not much. I figured that was up to you. I suspect Jocelyn will tell her about Bill."

"How do you feel about what Lara said?"

I chuckled, "I'm not exactly in a position to object when she told me what I told Maggie for most of the past year."

"Not what I asked, Petrovich. I know you have a strong hypocrisy filter, but I asked how you feel."

"That we're on the right track. She talked to her mom and her biological father, and the two attorneys are in agreement that I'm the kind of guy she needs, at least from the 'Doctor Mike' angle. Both of them pointed out that the 'Deacon Michael' angle has its own set of burdens, which might turn out to be larger."

"Larger? How so?"

"Think about the reaction Nikolas had to my joke about Jim's dipstick. Both Lara and I will be living under microscopes. Honestly, she couldn't wear a bikini similar to the one Dona had on. At *best* she could wear a modest one-piece, and I know there are women in the church who object to even THAT in public. Having your own pool is one thing but at the lake? Some would have a fit."

"And you have to worry about that? The one or two old biddies who object?"

"It depends on what they're objecting to, but a bathing suit? Probably so."

"On the other hand, is Elizaveta going to even let you see her naked? Or is this an only in the dark, under the covers, missionary position thing?"

"You have met Natalya Vasilyevna, right?" I asked with a silly smile.

Clarissa laughed, "A completely prim and proper lady who would never THINK about wearing a bathing suit in public. And yet, apparently, a sex-crazed teenager in private! At least from the indications you both have given."

"Indications?"

Clarissa laughed, "OK, you didn't give specific details, but it was pretty clear from both of you that 'wild' is the correct adjective used to describe sex between the two of you."

"I'm going to need a couple of gallons of brain bleach after I say this, but my mom is very prim and proper in public."

Clarissa laughed even harder, "What exactly did she tell you?"

"She embroidered a bit, but I get the 'Tasha' vibe from what she was saying. Tasha's mom married young, and according to Tasha, it was for the same reason SHE wants to marry young!"

"So all these Russian women are just, pardon the expression, wanton sluts in the bedroom?"

"Strong evidence suggests my grandfather and his friends had no complaints about their wives in that regard."

"I hadn't thought of THAT impediment to you and me marrying."

"That kind of dual life is not something you could handle?"

"That would actually be the biggest hurdle, I think. Angie cleared it easily. So will Elizaveta, though there will be other hurdles for her to clear. Lara will have to give serious thought to living under the microscope, just as I would have."

"Which is the point her mom and dad were trying to make. Her stepdad is of the opinion that she's old enough to make her own decisions, and if she thinks she can handle it, then he won't object or interfere."

"Would he give his blessing?"

"Only in the sense that he would give Lara a blessing to choose her own way forward. His parenting style is very interesting, and it's something Lara would like to adopt. That's an interesting question for the future, though I have to say, I'm growing fonder of the idea."

"Because your kids, like Tasha and Sasha, will be under the microscope as well."

"Yes. But as you've seen, Deacon Vasily wasn't thrown out of the church, and he wasn't reprimanded or anything else. That said, if the kids are completely unruly, disrespectful, or anything like that, it could have negative effects because it calls into question your ability to parent. And forget any counter-arguments because it's all perception. And that's what Lara really has to think about -- can she handle life as Matushka Lara."

"And where do you see Elizaveta's struggle?"

"The opposite, really. Can she be the partner I need?"

"She did a pretty good job of getting your attention and making her case."

"Yes, but look at all my friends."

"Above average intelligence. Even the High School girls were intelligent if I can even use those words in the same sentence!"

"But not just intelligence," I said. "A desire to learn, to be challenged, and to explore."

"Strange new worlds? To seek out new life and new civilizations?"

I laughed, "I doubt we'll be going into space. Think about the OTHER thing she'll have to deal with, something that is a concern for many of the conservative Russian Orthodox faithful."

"Robby, Lee, and me."

"Yes. Lara just went with the flow. I don't know if Elizaveta can do that. Not to mention the OTHER issue with you."

"Having a baby together."

"That's going to be VERY tricky to broach with Elizaveta."

"I have a wild idea if you want to hear it."

"Go on."

"Donate now, have your sperm frozen, and put it in my custody."

"That would solve part of the problem," I said. "But there's still the issue of the baby being mine."

"And if we were to keep that private? Between you, me, and whomever I'm with?"

"What about telling our son or daughter?"

"I didn't say I'd thought this through completely! But isn't there going to be a problem with church if we were to publicly announce we had a child?"

"And the fallout of NOT doing that on my marriage when it came out?"

"You do realize that because of your ordination, there's really only one possible solution that actually works for us to have a kid together, right?"

"A solution which nature has made impossible," I sighed. "And my faith has ruled out every other option."

"And neither of us can change those things because they are integral to who we are at our core."

"«Гобно» (*gavno*)," I sighed. ("shit")

"In a world where you weren't Orthodox, we'd find a bisexual girl like Rebekah to share our lives with."

I chuckled, "Thank you for THAT image the day after I vowed to be chaste for the next year or so!"

"Actually, that wasn't the promise you made," Clarissa smirked. "And I won't even venture a guess how many times I had that image in MY mind!"

"In a different world..." I sighed.

"But you can't not be Orthodox any more than I can't not be lesbian."

"True. But I wonder if it makes sense to donate anyway? One never knows where life may lead nor what might happen."

"You wouldn't have a problem with that?" Clarissa asked.

"We're not committing to anything, just leaving an option open, no matter how remote."

"I did some checking, and there are two ways -- masturbation, which I think is obvious, or a special collection condom, which I had no idea existed."

"Which YESTERDAY would have made a difference!" I declared.

"Giving you the chance to make love to me a dozen times or so to ensure a sufficient supply? How *convenient!*"

I chuckled, "There's this three-letter word you girls are all fond of using for me. But all kidding aside, you let me know what you want to do."

"Let me think about it, and we can talk more in a week or so."

"OK."

"I love you, Petrovich."

"I love you, too, Lissa."

"Back to the issue at hand -- what's your next step?"

"Dinner at Elizaveta's house. I'll speak to her dad after we take the MCAT next Friday."

"As much as I teased you about the popcorn, this could turn out to be a difficult choice, couldn't it?"

"Very much so. Think they've had enough time?"

"Yes."

We headed back to the house and found Jocelyn and Lara on the patio.

"Did she tell you all of her 'Mike Loucks' stories?" I asked.

"Let's see," Lara said, "Smocks? Shoes? Bleeding girl? Spat, which let your other friend into what became your trio?"

"Sounds like she hit the high points," I replied. "Tasha said we're welcome anytime for coffee or tea."

"Why don't we go over now?" Lara suggested.

We left Doctor Blahnik's house and headed to Tasha's apartment over the Quick Mart. We had a good time talking and drinking coffee, went to A&W for lunch, spent the afternoon at Doctor Blahnik's house, and all of us went to Vespers. After Vespers, we stopped for Chinese food and took it back to Doctor Blahnik's house, where we found her, Derek, Milena, and Joel. We ate, then spent the evening with them.



July 8, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Sunday morning, Lara and I went to church, and after liturgy, we had lunch in the church hall, and I taught Sunday school. I had some curious looks from Elizaveta, which I would have to address, but there was no reasonable way to do that until I spoke to her father. She didn't look upset, so I felt I was on reasonably steady ground. After church, Lara and I went to Doctor Blahnik's house to spend the afternoon together before she had to head home.

"What are you doing for the rest of the Summer?" I asked.

"Being a bum!" she laughed. "I'll spend time with my cousin, my dad, and his family and take in some Pirates games. I'll come see you again in a few weeks if that's OK."

"It's always OK! What about meeting the parents?"

"Why don't you plan to come to Pittsburgh over Labor Day weekend? That will give us enough time for you to meet both families."

"OK. And when you come to visit, we'll go see my parents and grandparents."

"Your grandfather has to approve?"

"More like not object," I replied. "He and the bishop were friends when they were younger when Vladyka was still called Timofei. And I can't imagine he'll have an objection."

"But the bishop has to approve?"

"Actually, he won't object to any faithful Orthodox woman as my wife, but he WILL ask you if you are OK with me being ordained and if you understand the commitment."

"Is that what happened with Kimiko?"

"He was concerned, but what really factored into her decision was not being able to give up her Japanese culture."

"Any more than you would give up your Russian Orthodox culture."

"Exactly. She tried, but in the end, the sacrifice was just too great."

"How serious were you with her?"

"Serious enough," I replied. "Other than Tasha and Katy, nobody else came close."

"It was interesting talking to Katy this morning. She seemed relieved to have dodged the bullet of your ordination."

"Being a Matushka is absolutely not for her. And that would have been clear to the bishop, who then wouldn't have been able to ordain me."

"Not that I'd do something like this, but say you married, and then the girl changed her mind and refused."

"I'm not sure about the bishop, but I'd consider that equivalent of breaking her vows."

"That would be pretty much a complete break of faith. What would you do?"

"There is no reasonable solution at that point. A divorce would block future ordination."

"And staying in the marriage would be horrible; you'd resent her forever."

"Which is why I need to get the commitment in advance and why the bishop wants to speak to whomever I intend to marry."

"You have my word that I won't create any difficulties for you in that regard."

"Is there anything else you want to talk about or do before you head home?"

"Make out!"

We spent about thirty minutes cuddling and kissing before I walked Lara out to her Corvette.

"Yours?" I asked as she got into the driver's seat.

"Yes. Sixteenth birthday present."

"Why not bring it to campus?"

"Because I want to fit in. Too many people treat you differently if they know your family has money. It's so much easier to just be Laura or Lara and be like everyone else."

"That does make sense."

"And besides, it's my parents' money, not mine."

"See you in a couple of weeks?"

"Yes!"

She closed the door, started the engine, and pulled away from the curb. When she was out of sight, I went back inside to hang out with Clarissa until it was time for dinner with Tasha.

Later that evening, I talked with Dona and let her know what Lara and I had discussed. She smiled, told me it was what she'd expected, and we agreed we'd continue our mini golf games after what I was calling my 'MCAT Weekend'.



July 13, 1984, Cincinnati, Ohio

"I am SO glad your agreement with Lara allowed us to share a bed," Clarissa said early on Friday morning.

"Though I'm not sure she contemplated it being naked," I replied.

"Is there anyone safer than me?"

"Yes and no," I replied. "Do you want to shower first, or should I?"

"I'm guessing 'together' runs afoul of the 'no *sleeping* together'?"

"Let's say it's pushing the envelope further than I think I could comfortably explain."

"You go first, then."

I went into the bathroom, turned on the spray, adjusted the temperature, and got in. I took a quick shower and then trimmed my beard. Clarissa showered, and when we were both dressed, we went to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. When

we finished eating, we checked out, then headed to the testing center. We found the correct room and approached a woman at a desk.

"I need your ID and your registration form, please," a woman about my mom's age said.

I handed over my driver's license and the form I'd received in the mail.

"Thank you, Mr. Loucks. I'll need you to sign this form. You're not permitted to take anything with you into the room except your ID and the locker key. The lockers are on the wall behind you. Put everything except your ID in the locker. That includes your watch, wallet, coins, keys, pocket knife, or anything else. Also, any snacks and your lunch."

"I assume I can keep my clothes," I grinned.

She laughed, "I believe we'd prefer that! Just make sure your pockets are empty except for your locker key and ID."

I walked over to the lockers, put my watch, wallet, car keys, and prayer rope in one of them, closed the door, turned the key, and pocketed it. Clarissa did the same thing, and we went into the testing room. I found the seat with my name on it and sat down. Clarissa's seat was two rows to the right and one row behind. The proctor gave us each a pair of pencils and a thin blank notebook for use as scratch paper. Other students filed in and took their seats.

Promptly at 8:00am, the proctor handed out the exam booklets for the first section of the test. After a brief set of instructions, he set a timer and called out, 'Begin'. The first part of the test was chemistry, and before answering any questions, I quickly scanned the testing booklet. Nothing jumped out at me as problematic, so I went back to the first page and began. I moved deliberately

through the questions, not taking too long but not rushing, even when I was sure of my answers.

I finished the booklet with time to spare, so I went back to check on questions where I had been unsure or flat-out hadn't known the answer. On a few of those, I could eliminate two of the four options, but there were two questions where I simply had to make a guess, but not even an educated one, because I simply had no idea. That made me a bit nervous about the next section of the test, which was physics.

During our first break I quickly used the restroom, got a banana from my locker, and ate it. Clarissa and I exchanged positive looks, but we didn't talk to each other before going back into the exam room. The proctor handed out the physics test booklets, set the timer, and called out 'Begin'. As I had with the chemistry test, I paged through the test booklet and realized this section was going to be even harder than I'd feared.

I worked through the test questions, doing my best not to completely freak out. We'd studied, but given our complete lack of focus on physics in our coursework, there were several questions which I simply had no idea how to solve, so I skipped them. I came back to them and wracked my brain for memories of High School physics, as well as the two physics classes we'd taken and our study guides. I was still pondering answers to a few questions when the proctor called time.

During the break, I used the restroom again and bought a 7-Up from the vending machine, and Clarissa and I exchanged looks of commiseration. We'd just finished what we knew would be the most difficult section of the test, and to me, the rest seemed like it was all downhill. I ate another banana, and we went back into the testing room for the biology part of the test.

Compared to physics, biology was a breeze. My initial scan of the exam booklet made me confident I'd get a high score and I might even exceed my target of 12 or 13. Once again, I made deliberate progress through the booklet, ensuring I didn't make any mistakes. There were, as there had been with the chemistry section, a few questions to which I didn't know the answer, but here, I could make very educated guesses. I finished the booklet, including my review of my answers, with plenty of time to spare.

During our thirty-minute lunch break, I ate my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, another banana, and two Double Stuf Oreo cookies, all of which I washed down with 7-Up. I used the restroom just before heading back into the exam room for the general science section of the exam, which turned out to be slightly harder than the chemistry and biology sections but not nearly as hard as the physics section.

The afternoon continued as the morning had, with breaks between the reading and quantitative sections, both of which I felt I'd completed adequately enough to score my target twelves. If everything went as I hoped, I'd easily make the 90th percentile, which would mean admission to the school of my choice. I was sure I'd get grief from someone about choosing McKinley Medical School rather than some prestigious school, but it met my needs and fulfilled my goals, and, in the end, that was all that mattered.

When we finished the test, we were given the option to void the test and were admonished not to speak about specific details of the test, then signed a document attesting to the fact that we understood our scores could be canceled if we violated any of the rules about speaking about the test. We handed in our scratch paper, then left the room. Clarissa and I gathered our things and quickly left the building.

"How do you think you did?" she asked.

"Except for physics, I'm pretty confident. You?"

"The same. And given that scores are relative to other test-takers, not absolute, I'd say I'm happy."

"Me, too. Basically, we only need composite scores of around 62 to get into McKinley Medical School, and if we can't get at least 10 or 11 on every section, we probably shouldn't even think about being doctors!"

"And yet, you can get in with scores of less than 60," Clarissa countered. "You know what they call the last person in the graduating class in medical school?"

"'Doctor'," I replied with a grin.

"We should be receiving interview letters soon. Still planning to do all of them?"

"Yes. Driving to Indianapolis or Pittsburgh is no big deal. I'm sure we'll get into McKinley Medical School, but having backup options is important."

"Where are we having dinner?" Clarissa asked.

"Technically, it's a fasting day, but given the circumstances, I'd say Skyline Chili."

"Sold!"

We started walking towards Skyline, which was about five blocks from the testing center.

"Did you know the guy who started Skyline, Nicholas Lambrinides, is Greek Orthodox?" I asked.

"No!" Clarissa exclaimed in surprise. "Seriously?"

"Yes. He emigrated from Greece and decided to open a restaurant in Price Hill, overlooking the city. Hence, the name 'Skyline'."

"Do they make fasting-compatible chili?"

I chuckled, "No. A lot of Greeks run restaurants, but mostly, they don't worry about fasting rules because most of their customers aren't Orthodox. He is also providing an important service."

"Service?"

"Probably the only way I'll ever have a '5-way' in my life!" I teased.

Skyline Chili, '5-way' meant spaghetti topped with Skyline Chili and cheese, with kidney beans and onions added. Eliminating either beans or onions created '4-way', and if you had neither, it was '3-way'.

Clarissa laughed, "I think if you wanted to be a complete pig, some of Milena's thespian and musician friends would probably be game! Or maybe your sister's friends, if that were their only chance!"

"Riiiiiiight," I chuckled, "because I'd do it even if, by some miracle, a group of High School girls was willing to have group sex!"

"Aha!" Clarissa exclaimed triumphantly. "YOU thought about them instead of Milena's friends!"

"Oh, shut up!" I said, laughing. "And talk about breaking my promise to Lara!"

"That might be a violation."

"Might?"

"May I point out something very, very important?"

"Sure."

"Mike Loucks is laughing and joking after he took the MCAT, the test he absolutely dreaded taking when I met him, and the fear of which kept him in a constant state of near-panic."

"I might have changed a bit," I replied. "Thanks to you."

"Let's give credit where credit is due and call it a group effort. And not just Tasha, Jocelyn, and me, but Sandy, Sophia, Milena, Melody, and a few others as well. I'd say we whipped you into proper shape to actually be a good doctor. I can't even imagine what your mental, physical, and emotional state would be right now if you were like you were when I met you."

"A complete basket case," I replied.

"You had the drive and determination, so you probably would have passed, and you'd have gone to medical school and become a technically competent doctor. Now, though, you're going to make a *great* doctor."

"Four years of medical school and three or four of Residency will determine that."

Clarissa shook her head, "No, this was your major test. You're very good in a college setting; even during your Freshman year when you were a complete worry-wart, you were good. Now that you're relaxed, you're even better."

"Thanks."

"I also know you're struggling with how many girls you've been with, but may I make an observation in that regard?"

"Sure."

"Forgetting the 'sin' aspect for the moment, each of those was necessary to make you into the man you are today. Could that have happened with fewer partners? Potentially. With none besides Jocelyn? No. Even if you and Emmy had ended up dating for a couple of years, you wouldn't have had the experiences necessary to become who you are. I guess what I'm saying is, don't beat yourself up about it. You're the most faithful person I've ever met, you don't shove your faith down other people's throats, and you simply live your life according to the precepts of your faith."

"Minus the sex," I replied.

"I can't imagine there isn't some hagiography that applies here besides Augustine."

I chuckled, "Mary of Egypt."

"Who?"

"You didn't pay close enough attention the fifth week of Great Lent!" I chuckled.

"It's all a blur, Petrovich! You have twenty-one years of repetition on me!"

"True. Mary of Egypt was a woman who lived during the fifth and sixth centuries. She is also known as Maria Aegyptiaca, born sometime around AD445 and reposed sometime around AD520. Those dates are questioned, though, and the Romans say she lived a hundred years earlier. But I defer to the *Prologue from*

Ohrid, a fairly thorough set of hagiographies. There's a book about her, a *Vita*, or 'Life', written by Sophronius of Jerusalem, who was Patriarch of Jerusalem, but it doesn't give specific, verifiable dates."

"He's a saint?"

"Yes. Anyway, Mary ran away from her home in Egypt at around twelve and became a prostitute, but discovered she liked sex so much that she gave away her services and lived by begging instead. According to Saint Sophronius, she was driven by an insatiable passion, with no desire to control her lust or behavior. Sound familiar?"

"I don't think you're that bad, Petrovich. But go on."

"Anyway, she basically screwed and begged her way through the next twenty years or so, then traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, with the intent of enticing pilgrims to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre into having sex. She paid for her trip with sex and found many willing sex partners in Jerusalem. But then, she tried to enter the church for the liturgy, and some unseen force prevented her."

"A force field?"

I chuckled, "More likely, one of the clergy recognized her as a prostitute and had someone drag her away, but we'll go with the hagiography and call it an 'unseen force'."

"Why do you discount the miracles when you believe everything else?"

"Because I know exaggeration and hyperbole when I see them! The thing is, it doesn't matter if it was a *Star Trek* force field, God, or a group of subdeacons tasked to keep harlots out of the church. The point is, she wasn't able to go into

the church because of her spiritual state. If I were a literalist, I'd be at the Irreverend Saddler's church or one like it."

"So, what happened?"

"She was remorseful, and when she saw an icon of the *Theotokos* outside the church, she prayed for forgiveness and repented of her lifestyle. She made a vow of asceticism and then attempted to reënter the church, and this time, she wasn't prevented."

"Which fits your idea that a group of clergy prevented her from entering the church, heard her confession, and let her in at that point."

"Exactly. But really, the details aren't as important as the lesson. Once she was in the church, she venerated a relic of the True Cross, then returned to the icon of the *Theotokos* and heard a voice telling her that if she crossed the Jordan River, she'd find the rest she desired."

"Another clergyman?"

"I would think so, but the implication is that it was an angel; as the Scriptures say, many have entertained angels unawares. After that, she went to Saint John the Baptist Monastery on the banks of the Jordan, received the Eucharist, then crossed the Jordan River to retire to the desert to live as an ascetic hermit in penance. She died some years later, with her body being found incorrupt."

"Something possible in the desert."

"Yes, though there are other stories about individuals reposing and their bodies not decaying. And that, dear Lissa, is why," I cleared my throat loudly, "'Comrade' Lenin is lying 'incorrupt' in public view."

"No way!"

"Yes. The Communists adapted Orthodox traditions into Communist ones. And of course," I cleared my throat again, "'Saint Vladimir' *has* to be incorrupt because he's greater than all the Orthodox saints. If you watch the Russian military parades, they're led by banners. Think about where that came from."

"Pascha! The banner with the icon of the Resurrection leads the procession."

"Yes, and then instead of cross and candles and icons and other liturgical items, it's pictures of Lenin and Marx, and guns and tanks and missiles. And think about the Politburo."

"They stand and wave, and oh my God! They give their blessings just like the bishop."

"Yep."

"Wild. So how did Mary die?"

"Old age, I would guess. About a year before she died, she recounted her life to Zosimas of Palestine, another saint. A year later, she was dead, and the story gets a bit fanciful, saying her body was translated to the place where she'd met Saint Zosimas, and he buried her with the help of a passing lion."

"Do people actually believe that stuff?"

I nodded, "Sure. And there's nothing wrong with pious belief. But there's also nothing wrong with simply learning the lesson taught by the hagiography. Walking into Skyline as we are now, I can discuss and debate the literal truth of the story. Walking into the temple, well, then the story is 'true', and I simply don't question it."

"Interesting."

We went up to the counter, ordered our 5-way chili, and when we had it, took seats by the front window. I prayed, and we began eating.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but why do you feel it's OK to break your fasting rule?"

"Because rote adherence to it, simply for the sake of adherence, profits me nothing. You'll find fanatics who insist that what I'm doing right now is a grave sin, but it's not. There's no need to even discuss this with Father Nicholas unless it causes me some kind of spiritual problem."

"What about doing this in front of Tasha's intended?"

"Ah, then the rule about not giving offense comes into play. So, unlike Saint Nicholas of Pskov the Fool-For-Christ, I'm not about to challenge anyone else on their fasting practices, BUT if my own practices give offense, then I'll conform to the strictest rules."

"What did he do?"

"Confronted Ivan the Terrible about fasting during Great Lent but also for murdering his enemies and conducting war during Lent."

"He lived?"

"The Tsars were afraid of the men and women known as 'Fools for Christ' because they were revered by the faithful for flouting social convention for the sake of the faith. The Communists would simply have killed him; the Tsar could not do that and survive."

"I think Melody is right."

"About?"

"You need to confront that idiot Saddler."

I shook my head, "He wouldn't even be able to hear me. His mind is made up, and nobody can tell him he's wrong despite ample evidence. He could make the same accusation, but I don't think it would stand up."

"A debate, Petrovich. Challenge him to a public debate. You'll wipe the floor with him."

"I can think of far less frustrating ways to spend a few hours."

"Think about it."

I shrugged and went back to enjoying my 5-way. When we finished, we walked back to the hotel, where I retrieved my car and headed to Route 50, which took us to Route 125 and finally to Angie's house in Anderson Township. I parked in the driveway, and Clarissa and I went up to the door. Angie's mom let us in and showed us to the living room, where Angie was waiting.

"Hi!" she exclaimed, hopping up to get a hug.

"Hi, Angie," I replied, hugging her lightly. "How are you?"

"Good. Hi, Clarissa!"

"Hi, Angie."

We all sat down, and I realized Angie was doing FAR better than the previous time I'd seen her. Over the phone I'd detected more liveliness, but now I saw her eyes were brighter, her complexion less sallow, her red hair shinier, and her movement less mechanical.

"How was your test?" she asked.

"Tough, but we both think we did well," I replied. "How is work?"

"Good. I'm working full-time now."

"And church?"

"I go three times a week. Mom actually is going with me, believe it or not."

"That's good. Did you go for Holy Week?"

"About half the services. It was too much for Mom to take me up to Loveland so many times. Anna took me to Pascha and stayed with me for a bit of the party."

"How is she?"

"She's fine. She said to say 'Hi' and said if you wanted, you could stop by."

"We don't really have a lot of extra time," I said. "Tell her I said 'hello' when you see her."

"I will. She and I are going bowling tomorrow."

"Good. You seem much better."

"They took me off everything except the anti-depressants two weeks ago. It's a test, but for the last week, I've felt almost like myself."

And that explained the change in her personality, or rather, the return of her personality. If they could keep her off the psychoactive drugs and control her mood swings, she'd actually be able to live a very good life, though if her personality was the one she'd exhibited in McKinley, she'd very likely never have a relationship, just as Doctor Mercer had predicted.

"That's good," I replied. "What happens next?"

"I want to take a class at Claremont Junior College, but Doctor Mercer isn't sure if that's a good idea just yet. But I have another six weeks before I have to enroll."

"Listen to Doctor Mercer's advice," I said gently. "She's really very smart, and I think she's done a good job of taking care of you."

"I know. It's just frustrating. Are you dating?"

I nodded, "Yes. I met an Orthodox girl from the Pittsburgh area. She just finished her Freshman year."

"Serious?"

"It's possible," I replied. "We'll see what happens when she comes back to school."

"What about you, Clarissa?"

"I'm seeing a girl named Abby, who's a nurse in McKinley."

"Did Fran and Jason set a date?" Angie asked.

"Not until after he gets his Master's," I said. "But they're going to get an apartment together. Sandy and Pete are a couple, too. Robby and Lee are still together."

"Have you seen Katy?"

I nodded, "Yes, but only at church. We're just friends."

"Are you doing anything special when you graduate?"

"Clarissa, Sandy, and I are going to Europe for a month to backpack and stay in youth hostels. Some other people might go with us, but the three of us are going for sure."

"That sounds like fun. Mom and Dad are taking me to Disney World next month."

"I loved that trip when we made it. It's something I want to do again, but it will have to wait ten years or so. How's your little brother?"

"Fine. He has a girlfriend and spends all his time with her."

I wondered if they had tried to find her older brother, but that wasn't something I could ask Angie.

"Cool," I replied.

"Mom has cake and coffee for us," Angie said.

We got up and went to the kitchen where Mrs. Stephens served us cake and coffee, and when we'd finished, Clarissa and I thanked her, then said 'goodbye'

to Angie and left the house. We got into the car and headed for Milford, where we'd stay at the Mill Street Inn.

"Night and day," Clarissa said after I'd pulled out of the driveway.

"Yes, but very much the Angie of right before her first breakdown, which means a whole lot of unresolved issues. And you remember what we learned in psychology -- a course of treatment with antipsychotics is limited at first, but many, many people have relapses because of some trigger."

"I remember. But working full time and being able to go out with Anna seems huge."

"Sure, but she was taking a full course load at Taft, too. And had two breakdowns, in between which she was functioning OK, minus the obsessive focus on having sex with me."

"She's not the only one!" Clarissa teased. "There are a few women on whom you've had that effect!"

"A sure sign of insanity," I chuckled.

"Them? Or you?"

"There was never any question about me not being sane! But them? I'd say that's a primary indication!"

"Hogwash, Petrovich! You're a sensitive, caring guy who knows how to please a girl, and that includes at least one lesbian!"

"At least?"

"Who knows what secrets other girls keep?" she replied cryptically.

"What the heck are you trying to tell me?" I asked.

"A true statement -- at least one lesbian."

"Now you're just messing with me!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Are we sleeping together again tonight?"

"If you wish, yes. You're sure Abby is OK with this?"

"As I said, Abby and I aren't sleeping together just yet. If and when we do, then this can't happen."

"Then I'd love to sleep with you in my arms again, Lissa."

"I love you, Petrovich!"

"I love you, too, Lissa."

XIII. Setting the Stage

July 14, 1984, Milford, Ohio

"Good morning, Mike! Good morning, Clarissa!" Doctor Mercer said when we walked into her office early on Saturday morning.

"Hi, Doctor Mercer!" we both replied.

"Clarissa, did you want to talk this morning?" Doctor Mercer asked.

She shook her head, "No, I'm fine. Mike can tell you everything."

"OK. Mike, come on in. Clarissa, there's a deli that serves great coffee on Route 50, just past the Frisch's and before the Wendy's, if you want."

"You know what, I think I will. Mike, can I have the keys?"

I nodded, took the keys from my pocket, handed them to Clarissa, and as she left, I went into Doctor Mercer's office and shut the door. As usual, I sat in a chair facing her desk and waited while she got a notebook and my file.

"Angie was close to her old self," I said. "I'm glad you could get her off the medication."

"She's still on anti-depressants, but we did achieve our goal of getting her off the psychoactive drugs. Don't be fooled, Mike."

I nodded, "I know. I was telling Clarissa last night that relapses are possible. I've seen it myself with her second breakdown."

"Second one that you noticed," Doctor Mercer replied. "Her first was when you French kissed her, but she controlled it enough to keep it from derailing her life."

I sighed, "I should have realized that."

"Remember what I said about being a trained professional? Don't beat yourself up. I only know this from my last session with her when she was basically free from the effects of the antipsychotics. I did discover quite a bit these last two weeks, but that was the real revelation."

"How so?"

"Be very careful how you hear what I'm going to say, please."

I nodded, "I remember your warnings."

"That kiss did two things -- made her desire to have sex with you and frightened her beyond measure."

"Because the mere prospect of sex was traumatic for her, forget even doing it."

"Yes. Which is why I have to commend you for refusing her advances last Summer. I know this will make no sense, but she wanted to go to bed with you but was frightened of kissing you. She felt just 'getting it over with' would solve the problem. I think you can work out how badly THAT would have gone."

"I suspect she would have actively tried to kill herself rather than simply neglecting herself."

"A suicide attempt would have been the most likely outcome, yes. Another possibility, and please do not laugh at this, would have been true nymphomania

-- the endless seeking of sexual pleasure as a form of self-medication. Then, at some point, a mental break and most likely a successful suicide."

"Why the distinction?"

"In the first case, it would be more a cry for help, and like most women, she'd use some kind of drug and most likely survive. That's what happened with Jocelyn, right?"

"Yes."

"The second one, she'd have done something more permanent. Women tend not to use guns, but driving into a bridge pillar or off a cliff or into the river or something similar would be quite effective."

"You've seen that?"

"Either I have, or Doctor Paulus has. There are patterns of behavior amongst young female schizophrenics. Filtering for Angie's experience, those two paths are statistically most likely. But, as with all of these things, each individual is unique."

"And her prognosis?"

"The same as before. If we can keep her off the antipsychotics, she'll be able to work, have friends, and enjoy life. Given her mental state, I don't know that she'd ever be able to engage in even simple intimate behavior such as kissing. There's a great risk it would trigger the exact same sequence of events you witnessed."

"I guessed that was true."

"She's very repressed in that way, but not because of her parents, at least so far as I can tell. You know, probably about as well as I do, about the events that she witnessed. But I am convinced there is something else, though we may never know what it was. Or, perhaps, it's just who Angie is. There are people for whom intimate contact is impossible, even if they aren't diagnosable."

"Because it's only diagnosable if it interferes with their functioning in their daily lives," I replied. "If they WANTED to have sex but couldn't, then it would be a problem."

"You do listen!"

"I have half a dozen female friends who might disagree with you!"

"I suspect you're better now, though. Teenage boys aren't known for heeding input from women unless it's to their sexual benefit!"

I chuckled, "I might have experienced that situation."

"Though you often listened to Jocelyn, right?"

"Because I didn't see Jocelyn as a girl until she turned fourteen. THEN she was a girl if you catch my drift."

"Secondary sex characteristics tend to have that effect on men. It's genetic and normal. Nature does want the species to propagate! And on that note, what did Clarissa mean?"

"After a very thorough set of experiments, she concluded that being able to make love with me on one, or even two occasions, was not only possible but enjoyable and fulfilling in its own way, but it wouldn't provide what she truly desired."

"And you two are OK?"

I nodded, "Closer than ever. The last two nights, we slept in the same bed, naked, as we've done quite a bit since we concluded we can't be husband and wife, and there has been no temptation, just closeness."

"You know the risks, right?"

"That if I struggle in my marriage, Clarissa and I might cross an uncrossable line."

"You have to be very careful there, Mike."

"I know."

"How are things going on that front?"

"I guess I'd say it's narrowed down to two possibilities, neither of whom were in the picture the last time I saw you."

Doctor Mercer shook her head, took off her glasses, pinched the bridge of her nose, then put her glasses back on.

"Go on," she said.

"I met an Orthodox girl from Pittsburgh, and we hit it off pretty well. We're exploring a possible future together. I'm also going to start courting a girl at church."

"What happened to," she flipped through her notes, "Maggie?"

"No spark," I replied. "Or rather, the spark died during the enforced year apart, thanks to her dad. Not to mention she's not Orthodox, and I concluded I pretty much need to marry someone who was born into the church. Angie would be the exception, except for her illness."

"You still have strong feelings for her."

I nodded, "I do. It's funny because the time apart hasn't caused them to wane. I know nothing can come of them, but that doesn't diminish how I feel about her."

"She knows that, Mike. And I'm afraid at some point she's going to proposition you again. You need to be very careful about your own feelings."

"I understand. And you know my response to her last Summer."

"But even that response now is a bad idea, and I think the reasons should be obvious."

I nodded, "They are. Trust me, I'm not going to do anything other than be her friend. If she hints at anything else, you'll be the first to know."

"Good. Just be very careful. Now, about these two young women -- are they aware of what amounts to a deadline?"

"Yes, they are."

"And how do you feel about them?"

"Either of them would make a good partner for my future."

Doctor Mercer sighed, "That is not what I asked, Mike. Turn off the logic filter for a moment and tell me how you FEEL."

"I feel content," I replied. "I believe I've found two young women who can be who and what I need them to be. If you're asking if I'm in love with either of them, the answer is 'no'. Can and will I learn to love them? Absolutely. Despite me doing the arranging, it's going to be an arranged marriage, with all the things that implies. We read some excerpts from the *Kama Sutra* in my world religions class, and it had some good advice. I also got good advice from my grandfather. I know this flies in the face of the modern world, but this is what I want."

"Want or need?"

"Those are the same thing, at least in this case. Once everything went wrong with Jocelyn, this was a fairly certain destination. I fought it, but then realized it's what I needed, and it will achieve what I want."

"Why two girls?"

"Circumstance, really."

"I take it other than looks, there are differences between them."

"One wants to be a homemaker; the other wants to be a High School teacher. Both of those are perfectly compatible with my future as a doctor and a deacon."

"They aren't older than you, are they?"

"No. Why?"

"How will you support them while you're in medical school?"

"I've saved a lot of money, and with having free room and board, along with a stipend, I was already in good shape. My grandfather gave me a fairly large gift

once it was clear the bishop wanted to ordain me, and between that, two other gifts, and my savings, it will work. A professor of mine has offered me a room in her home during medical school, and she has no problem with me having a wife live with me. And that would greatly reduce my costs compared to the dorms at the school. And yes, I've double-checked the math."

Doctor Mercer smiled, "I would have expected triple or quadruple."

"Probably a dozen times," I chuckled. "I was using the idiomatic expression of being sure."

"I should have asked -- how was the MCAT?"

"I'd say 'piece of cake', but it was tough. I feel good, though. So does Clarissa."

"I'm sure you did very well. Sorry for the detour, but back to your plans. What's going to be the deciding factor?"

"I don't know just yet. I have several months to get to know each of them better and talk through the future. And who knows, one or both of them might drop out."

"Then what?"

"Clarissa's suggestion was finding a bisexual girl and sharing her."

Doctor Mercer put her face in her palm, and I heard a whispered '*Oy vey*'.

"Sorry," she said. "That just...never mind. I can't speak about it."

"Another case?"

"A few intertwined cases. Wouldn't you have to give up on being ordained to do that? Maybe even leave your church?"

"Giving up on ordination would be mandatory because there are no grey areas in that regard. Leaving church would all depend on how we decided to handle it. But it's a silly dream, and I'm going to guess that you're going to tell me just how difficult it would be."

"The difficulties of a three-way relationship are orders of magnitude above those of a two-way relationship, and that's going to be difficult enough for you as it is. Something like that COULD work, but it would be fraught with all kinds of problems, problems you do not need as you go to medical school and do your Residency. A wife will likely provide stability and comfort; a trio would likely generate drama."

"I didn't say it was a REAL possibility, just something she suggested."

"And those kinds of suggestions, especially the idea of a lifetime of threesomes, would have NO influence on a healthy, red-blooded, American male?"

"That thought did cross my mind," I chuckled. "That said, Clarissa and I had a 5-way yesterday!"

"Skyline?" Doctor Mercer asked with a smirk.

"I should say 'no' just to get a reaction, but yes, of course. And, honestly, given my past experience, that holds no real attraction for me, even as a fantasy. Sure, the images are interesting, but I felt totally empty after the threesome I had."

"Are you involved sexually with either girl?"

I shook my head, "No. I intend to be chaste until my wedding night."

"Your history indicates that's a very difficult intention."

"And yet, one that I believe I'm able to keep," I replied. "I know I've tried and failed in the past, but things seem very different now."

"That makes your behavior with Clarissa even riskier."

I shook my head, "No, there is no risk there unless Clarissa were to change, something I do not expect to happen. That said, if it did, I'd marry her in a heartbeat. The ink on the license wouldn't even be dry when we married."

"Those were the feelings you had for Angie, too."

I nodded, "And the offer of chastity until marriage I made to her was real and attainable."

"So long as you understand the risks."

"That I'll fall off the wagon, so to speak, and then hate myself for it?"

"That would be the main one."

"While I have no intention of making that mistake, the entire point of confession and absolution is to prevent us from hating ourselves because we're mortal human beings with a proclivity to sin."

"And the desire?"

"Believe it or not, what I'll miss most is having someone in my bed, not having sex."

"Actually, for you, I believe it. Any other struggles?"

"There will be."

"Oh?"

"Doctor-patient privilege applies in spades to this. Liz is going to marry Paul Reynolds."

"And just when is that particular bomb going to be dropped on your parents?"

"Next weekend."

"Has Liz been seeing a counselor?"

"Yes, until March, I believe."

"Do you know if she discussed this with him or her?"

"I have no idea, but I'd expect not."

"Did YOU try to talk her out of it?"

"I gave my opinion and talked to her about it. Once it was clear she was determined to do it, I chose to love her and support her the best I could. Anything else would have alienated her permanently, and I just can't do that. And to be honest, he's a nice, hard-working, intelligent guy."

"Who had sex with a fourteen-year-old. While he was married and had a son of his own."

"I believe in repentance and forgiveness, Doctor Mercer. He served his time. He's on parole, has a job, and is doing his best to put some semblance of a life together. My sister loves him. He appears to love her. I did take one precaution, though."

"What's that?"

"I made sure he knew the address of the county morgue so he could save the county some trouble and drive himself there if he ever hurt my sister. He agreed to do that if it ever happened."

Doctor Mercer laughed and shook her head, "From a committed pacifist, that would be truly frightening. No threat, really, just a promise, so to speak. Do you think she would talk to me?"

"If your intention is to try to talk her out of it, all you'll do is make her angry. And angry with me as well because I asked her to see you."

"I suspected that might be the case. I take it his parole officer and whoever is responsible for his transition do not know she was his victim?"

"She insists, to this day, that she was not a victim, no matter what the State of Ohio has to say about the matter. As an adult, I know I would never sleep with an underage girl, but I'm also convinced that Liz sought him out and initiated the relationship. Did he make a grave error in judgment? Yes. Was the State of Ohio justified in putting him in prison? Yes. If he had been single and not had a kid, would I have turned him in? Probably not."

"You know, as a physician, you would be required to report the discovery of a relationship like that, no matter what the circumstances, right? There are some grey areas, but knowing, and I use this phrase carefully, that child abuse is happening, you have an ethical duty to report it."

"I know, and I would. And yes, I'm aware that turning him in led to the discovery that Liz was actually raped by the Kramer brothers and their friends. But I think what caused me to actually turn Paul in was his marriage and kid. And now, he's divorced, has no parental rights, and has to start over from scratch. He claims to have loved Liz from the beginning, and she certainly loves him. I'm in no real position to judge them now that she's made her decision. I'm sure you've dealt with underage kids having sex. Is it always a problem?"

"That depends on the kids and the difference in ages. It would be one thing for two High School kids, say a Senior and a Sophomore, or even a Freshman, to have sex. It would be a very different thing for a man of twenty-four to have sex with a High School Freshman. Are there instances where such a relationship might be OK? I suspect you could concoct some kind of scenario of a very, very mature fifteen-year-old wanting to be with a man in his thirties, but that would be so rare as to be the exception that proved the rule, so to speak. And I'd strongly advise against it."

"And yet," I said, "a ten-year age difference isn't a problem if the girl is twenty-two, right?"

"Because of HER maturity, Mike. At your age, even five years is a big gap, though, and I say this advisedly, not completely impossible. But add a few years to your age, and the disparity in experience and maturity becomes nearly impossible to countenance."

"So the marriages between teenagers and adults in history are what?"

"Part of history. The world is a different place. Maybe we've chosen the wrong path, but my gut doesn't tell me that's the case. In our highly industrialized, technology-oriented world, things are markedly different from those in an

agrarian society as the US mostly was before the Civil War. It's comparing apples to oranges."

"You make some valid points," I replied. "I'm just not quite sure how to resolve the grey areas."

"Nobody knows," Doctor Mercer said. "That's why they're grey areas. The law draws stark lines because it has to so that everyone knows what is acceptable and what isn't. And state legislatures are all over the map on this, with ages of consent ranging from sixteen to eighteen, and all kinds of exceptions for 'close in age', as well as differing levels of prosecution. In Ohio, no sane prosecutor would try to charge a High School Junior for having sex with a High School Freshman, even though technically, it's illegal. Make it a college Freshman and a High School Freshman, and some prosecutor might, depending on the circumstances. A case like Liz's will always be prosecuted."

"I understand we need laws, and generally speaking, I support them, but I've been the subject of overzealous psychiatrists and prosecutors, which gives me pause about giving them blanket authority to destroy someone's life because of one of those grey areas."

"None of us is perfect, Mike, including you."

"I know, but I disagree with the idea that the perfect is the enemy of the good. Yes, you can let striving for perfection become an obsession that prevents you from doing anything, but the Christian life is all about seeking perfection, with tools to help us achieve it, and with methods to deal with the inevitable failure. That's what seems to be missing from our system of government -- how to deal with failure in a way that helps the individual rather than simply seeks to punish them."

"There, you'll get no argument from me. We've given up on any notion of rehabilitation. And that's snuck into my field with some psychiatrists and psychologists relying on drugs rather than doing the hard work to salvage *something* from a life marred by mental illness. It's so much easier just to drug them or commit them than to do what I'm doing with Angie. Too many psychiatrists would simply have left her drugged because it resolved the symptoms which were causing her to act in ways which were harmful to herself."

"Seriously?"

"You're going to see, throughout your career, doctors who simply rely on pharmaceuticals to solve every problem, and if the symptoms resolve, they move on to the next patient, never actually treating the underlying problem if it can't be cured by some simple procedure. They prefer a lifetime of drugs to a difficult cure. That's especially true of my field, where resolution may never come. Angie most likely can't be cured and will need help for the rest of her life. It would be a LOT easier to simply drug her and not worry about it."

"That's insane," I replied. "And I meant to use that word."

"It is. And it's something I fight constantly. Don't fall into that trap, Mike."

"Never. Of course, I'm going to be dealing with emergent cases, not long-term care. Clarissa wants internal medicine, so she's more likely to run into that."

"True, but you'll be on staff and need to watch out for that kind of thing. You'll know it when you see it. Step in. That's my advice. And we're almost out of time. Anything else?"

"Any change in how I should help Angie?"

"Your weekly calls have been very helpful. I'd say just continue them, if you can, and see her occasionally if you can. I know we're treading a fine line here, but you're helping her, and you're able to keep your emotions under control."

"What happens when I get engaged?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. She knows you're dating, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. Anything else?"

"I think that's it unless you have something for me."

"No. I'd like to see you sometime in the Fall if that's possible."

"It should be. I'll let you know and arrange to see Angie at the same time."

"Thanks."

My session finished, I thanked Doctor Mercer and left her office, meeting Clarissa in the reception area. We headed down to my car for the drive to Rutherford and lunch with Liz and Paul.



July 14, 1984, Rutherford, Ohio

"Paul Reynolds, this is my friend Clarissa Saunders; Clarissa, Paul Reynolds."

They exchanged greetings, and Clarissa and I sat down in the booth at Lou's, where Liz and Paul had been waiting.

"May I get you something to drink, Sir?" Emmy asked me.

I laughed, "From you, I expected 'coffee, tea, or me?!'"

"Lou might frown on that, but I'm game!"

"A Coke, please," I replied with a smile.

"Bummer! Clarissa?"

"A Coke for me, too."

She left to get our drinks, and we quickly perused our menus so that when she came back, all four of us were ready to order. Emmy took our orders, then left to put them in with the kitchen.

"Do you still plan to tell Mom and Dad next Sunday?" I asked.

"Yes. I'll call Mom this afternoon and tell her I'll accept her open dinner invitation."

"You do realize that if you tell her I'm going to be there, she's going to know something is up, especially given you've barely spoken to them since graduation."

"I'm not sure what to do about that except to say that I asked you to come."

"I know," I replied. "Which means she'll call me and ask what's going on, and I'll have to give her the same answer as before -- I can't say anything, including whether I know or don't know what's going on. What exactly are you going to tell them?"

"The truth -- I love Paul, we're going to get engaged, and we'll marry as soon as he completes his parole."

"Do you guys plan to live together before you marry?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You may as well spring that on them as well. Get it all out at once, and then deal with the fallout, rather than make what amounts to multiple bombing runs."

"How bad is this going to be, Mike?" Paul asked.

"On a scale of *Bambi* to *Jaws*? You're going to need an even bigger boat."

"Your dad?"

I nodded, "One reason my rifle is still at my friend Dale's house. But my mom will go ballistic at first as well. I'll work on her, and hopefully, she'll work on my dad. When do you guys plan to move in together?"

"Probably around Labor Day," Paul replied. "We'll go out once or twice a week until then. My PO will need to meet Liz before that can happen."

"OK. Liz, you may as well just say that right off, though I'd leave talking to the Parole Officer out of the conversation."

"Are you coming alone?"

"I think I have to," I replied. "The last thing I want to do is drag someone into the middle of this. You remember what Dad said about Jocelyn and Dale when everything went down three years ago."

"Yeah. And Emmy, too."

"Yes. She's going to be *persona non grata* with Dad, probably permanently. I'm going to catch a lot of heat, too."

"I'm sorry, Mikey."

"I love you, Liz, and if this is what you want, then I'm going to support you. I don't think Paul is dangerous, so any other considerations are up to you, not me."

"You still don't approve?" Paul asked.

I smiled wryly, "Does it matter one way or the other?"

"No, I guess not. I have the address of the morgue in my pocket."

Clarissa laughed, "I'd keep it there, too. As a reminder."

"I know. Thank you both for supporting Liz, even if you don't approve."

Emmy brought our meals, and I prayed silently before I began eating.

"How is your job going, Paul?" I asked.

"Just fine. It's not the most challenging job in the world, but it's work, I get paid, and right now, that's all that matters. I really appreciate your help."

"And your hostess job, Liz?"

"Pretty much the same answer. But I get forty hours and the chance for some overtime if one of the other hostesses is off or calls in sick. I even worked a

couple of waitress shifts because of an emergency and the fact I live just down the street. When school starts, that won't work, but for the Summer, it's nice to have the extra money. How are things in McKinley?"

"Good. Tasha and Jocelyn are settled in, and Clarissa and I hang out with them a lot."

"Have you tried to talk to Maggie?"

"No. There really isn't any good that can come of that, at least as I see it. You were right about her dad messing things up."

"Everything OK?" Emmy asked, coming up to the table.

We all nodded, and she left.

"Maggie's dad is a real prick," Liz growled. "I tried to call her, but she wouldn't take my call. She's not really talking to anyone except Hannah, and Maggie isn't saying much to her."

"Just let it drop," I said. "Nobody can fix this at this point."

"How is Laura?"

"Fine," I replied, smiling because Liz purposefully used the English form of her name. "I'll bring her home to see Mom and Dad sometime next month and then go meet both sets of her parents over Labor Day weekend."

"Will you come to see us when you visit Mom and Dad?"

"We should be able to do that. We'll work it out. Most likely, it'll be Sunday after church. We can come to see you guys, then head to the house for dinner. I'll let you know once Lara lets me know when she's coming to visit."

"How did your test go?"

"Great," I replied. "We both think we did well."

"What's next?"

"We sent our applications. We just need to wait for interviews, which will start happening in September."

"Where do you want to go?" Paul asked.

"McKinley Medical School, but we're applying to UC, OSU, Indiana, and Pittsburgh."

"You're going together?"

"And we'll do our Residencies together and practice together."

"I have to ask; why aren't you a couple?"

Liz laughed, "Clarissa plays for the other team!"

"The other...oh!" Paul exclaimed. "Sorry."

"It's OK," Clarissa said with a smile. "We're that close, and you aren't the first person to ask that question. We both had misfortune -- his soulmate was born a lesbian, and my soulmate was born a straight male."

"Soulmate?" Paul inquired.

Clarissa nodded, "Yes. Literally, the only thing interfering with what would be the perfect marriage is my sexuality. But we're not letting that interfere with the rest of our lives. He'll marry, and I'll find a permanent girlfriend, and we'll all hang out together. Mike and I will work together, and his kids will play with kids we might adopt or have by artificial insemination."

"Are you seeing anyone, Clarissa?" Liz asked.

"Yes. A girl named Abby. She's a nurse."

"Can I get you anything else?" Emmy asked.

Everyone shook their heads, and she set the check on the table. Paul picked it up.

"I have this," he said. "It's the least I can do."

"If you're sure," I replied.

"I am."

We finished eating, said 'goodbye' and Clarissa and I headed back to McKinley.



July 15, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Sunday morning, after my run, I showered, dressed, and headed to church. Clarissa had elected not to go so she could see Abby, and Jocelyn went to her Lutheran church as she usually did. I hadn't had time to go to confession the

previous evening, so Father Nicholas heard my confession before Matins, as we had enough time to do that.

"How have these last two weeks been?" he asked in his usual way.

"Good. I've kept to the prayer rule you assigned, as well as the fasting rules, with the exception of treating myself to Skyline Chili following the MCAT."

Father Nicholas laughed softly, "I think we can safely not worry about that. I've always allowed you the freedom to make occasional exceptions because of your circumstances. How are your other struggles?"

"Under more control," I replied.

"As in, you've ceased inappropriate sexual activity?"

"That is my goal, and I've committed to myself to do my best to remain properly chaste until my wedding night."

"And what brought this on?"

"A commitment I made to Larisa Sergeyevna, as well as the complete impropriety of seeing her or Elizaveta Viktorovna under any other circumstances."

"An interesting development, and a good one as well. I encourage you to keep your prayer and fasting rules and resist temptation. To be blunt, you've put me in a very tricky position where I am required to say nothing despite having knowledge of completely inappropriate behavior."

I nodded, "I realize that, and that was an additional reason I had no struggle with committing to Lara that I would be chaste."

"She's aware of your, let's call it 'experience'?"

"Sufficiently so, yes. Potentially, I'll need to broach that topic with Elizaveta, but only in the most general sense. I do not want to mislead her."

"Be very careful as to when and how you broach that topic, Subdeacon. Too early, and it will seem as if you are asking her to engage in inappropriate behavior; too late, and if it's an impediment in her mind, you may have gone too far down the path to not have things blow up in your face."

"I understand, Father," I replied. "In both instances, I'm proceeding with caution. I'll speak to Viktor Nikolay'ich after Sunday School and arrange to have dinner at his house, as he requested. He's aware I've been seeing Lara, and I guess his father and her grandfather are friends."

"Every Russian man over the age of fifty seems to be friends with every other Russian man of that age! They can be worse than the «бабушки» (*babushki*) at times! So long as everyone is aware. Are you having any other struggles?"

"No, but I should tell you about what happened at the lake on the Fourth," I said. "I made a sexual innuendo with a non-Orthodox friend, and Nikolas Dmitriyevich seemed offended."

"One of the most difficult things we struggle with as clergy is the requirement that we not give offense. I am sure he knows you are a candidate for the diaconate and expects you to behave as a deacon. A subdeacon ought to behave in the same way, but there is a bit of leeway for the minor orders, though only a bit."

"I understand. I knew instantly I'd made an error. I apologized, and when one of my other friends said I shouldn't have to apologize, Tasha adamantly stated that such jesting was inappropriate. It won't happen again."

"Good. You're going to have to be more and more careful about how you behave in public. Soon enough, you'll wear your cassock a good deal of the time. That should help remind you, but it also means that you'll find there is zero tolerance. Is there anything else?"

"Not that I can think of at the moment," I said.

He put his *epitrachil* over my head and said the prayer of absolution. When he finished, he removed the *epitrachil*, and we exchanged a standard clerical greeting -- a hug and Russian-style kisses on the cheeks -- and then went through the deacon's door and into the altar to prepare for the services.

After services, lunch, and Sunday School, I asked Mr. Kozlov to speak privately and arranged to have dinner at their house the following Thursday. We shook hands, and I headed back to town to meet Clarissa and Jocelyn for our usual afternoon at Tasha's.

Later that evening, Lara called to let me know she wanted to visit the weekend of August 3rd, and we confirmed our plans for the weekend.



July 19, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

I arrived at the Kozlovs' home at 5:45pm, as Mr. Kozlov had requested. He opened the door to greet me and led me into the house, which was even bigger than Katy's, making it without question the largest house I'd ever visited. I realized that all the rooms in my parents' split-level house would fit on the first

floor of his house. He gave me a tour, from top to bottom, and then took me to the backyard, which had a swimming pool, a putting green, and the cottage.

"Nobody is living here now," he said, "but my mother-in-law stayed here each time my wife had a baby, and all the grandparents have used it when they stayed after parties. If you were to live here, then they would stay in a guest room in the house, of which there will be two because Elizaveta's room will be empty."

He used his keys to open the door and showed me in. It was cozy but not small. There was a living room with a small, free-standing wood stove, an eat-in kitchen with all the necessary appliances, a half bath just off the kitchen, a decent size bedroom, a bath with a large, claw-foot tub, and a small second room, which could serve as a nursery or a small study.

All the rooms were nicely furnished, and Elizaveta's statement that it would serve nicely for a young married couple was true, as was her belief it would suffice even after having a baby. There wouldn't be a way to entertain more than a few people, but I'd have other options if this were where I ended up living.

"It's gas heat and cooking," Mr. Kozlov said. "There is always wood against the house should you want a fire. There is a window air conditioner and ceiling fans to help circulate the air."

"It's very cozy," I said. "And certainly sufficient."

"Good. Shall we go back to the house? The women will have dinner ready shortly."

"Sounds good."

We went back to the house, and Mrs. Kozlov said that dinner was ready and asked us to go to the dining room. I followed Mr. Kozlov to the dining room, and

we sat down. A moment later, Elizaveta and her mom, Yulia, brought in roasted chicken, roasted potatoes, buttered corn, and rolls.

"Elizaveta made dinner," Mrs. Kozlov said. "I was simply her assistant."

"Thank you, Elizaveta," I said.

"You're welcome, Subdeacon."

"Would you please pray, Subdeacon?" Mr. Kozlov requested.

I nodded, "O Christ God, bless the food and drink of Thy servants, for Thou art holy, always, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen."

"Amen," the others added.

The food was VERY good, and I had two helpings to make sure Elizaveta knew I liked her cooking. When we finished the main course, Elizaveta and her mom brought out a «Наполеон» (*Napoleon*) cake, perhaps the best-loved Russian dessert. Making it was extremely time-consuming, requiring around three hours of work, not to mention the time to chill in the refrigerator. The cake was out of this world, and the coffee served with it was top-notch.

"Amazingly good!" I declared.

"Thank you, Subdeacon!" Elizaveta beamed.

When we finished dessert, Mr. Kozlov invited me to his study and offered me brandy, which I decided to accept, though I asked for only half a glass, which he obliged.

"Shall we plan Thursday evenings for the rest of the Summer?" Mr. Kozlov asked.

"That would be fine," I replied. "During the school year, I have a study group five nights a week."

"Perhaps Sunday dinner?"

At some point, Tasha would marry, and that would put an end to the group meals, though there would be other gatherings.

"Perhaps. We can discuss it at the end of next month if that's OK."

"Yes, of course."

By the time we finished our brandy, the women had finished the dishes, and Elizaveta and I were permitted to sit on a bench in the backyard, though with an appropriate distance between us and her mom in the garden not far from us.

"The meal was excellent!" I said. "And the dessert is even better!"

"I told you I knew how to cook and bake!"

"Yes, you did, and I didn't doubt you! I complimented you because I enjoyed the meal! Your dad suggested I come to dinner on Thursdays if that's OK with you."

"Of course it is! I thought that was obvious!"

"It was, but it's impolite to presume. You might have changed your mind."

"No way!"

"I also hear you spoke to Matushka Anastasia and Matushka Natalya, as well as Doctor Evgeni's wife."

"To know what's necessary to be a good wife for a deacon and a doctor, of course! And to learn about how difficult your medical training will be."

"And?"

"Short-term suffering for long-term satisfaction; much like the Christian life."

I chuckled, "So marrying me would be like being in Heaven?"

"Perhaps that's an exaggeration!" Elizaveta declared mirthfully.

"So marrying me would NOT be like being in Heaven?" I asked in mock offense.

"No! I mean...wait! You're messing with me!"

"Yes, I am!"

"That's not nice!" Elizaveta declared.

"But it's fun!"

"You owe me one kiss for teasing!"

"I think your mom will object."

"I'll keep track, and you can pay later when we can be alone together!"

XIV. Trinity

July 22, 1984, West Monroe, Ohio

When I drove up to my parents' house, I didn't see Liz's car, so I continued down the road and drove around for about ten minutes. I really didn't want to be grilled by my mom, and if Liz was there, I could avoid that uncomfortable conversation. All such a conversation could do would be to frustrate both my mom and me. When I drove by the house a few minutes later, Liz's car was in the driveway, so I backed my car into the driveway, parked, got out of the car, locked it, and went inside.

"Hi, Mikey!" Liz exclaimed, jumping up to hug me.

"Hi," I replied.

I greeted my mom and dad, got myself a Coke from the fridge, and sat down in the living room.

"When will you receive your test scores?" Mom asked.

"In a week or two," I replied. "Clarissa and I both received letters asking us to schedule interview dates at McKinley Medical School."

"What does that mean?" Liz asked.

"That they like our applications. They'll need to see our MCAT scores, and we have to pass the interview, and then we'll be accepted."

"What kind of questions do they ask?" Dad inquired.

"Everything from why I want to be a doctor to why that school to what I feel a doctor's responsibility to society is, and anything they feel is relevant to decide if I'm going to make it through medical school."

"You could have perfect grades and whatever is a top score on the test and still not get into medical school?" Liz asked.

"That's entirely possible. Just as you can go through medical school and not Match and not be able to find a Residency spot. Those are interview-based as well."

"What would you do?"

"I don't think getting into medical school will be a problem," I replied. "My backup plan for Residency has always been the Army or Navy -- preferably the Navy -- if it came to that. I'd apply for a commission and a Residency spot. But I don't think that's going to be necessary, either."

I heard the timer in the kitchen, and Mom got up to get dinner on the table. I offered to help and followed her into the kitchen. About two minutes later, with a pot of savory stew, bread, and salad on the table, we called my dad and Liz to come eat. Liz waited until Mom served ice cream to drop her bomb.

"I'm dating Paul Reynolds, and we're going to get married," Liz said firmly.

The explosion was immediate. My dad's face went red, and I expected to see steam literally come out of his ears. I was afraid his eyeballs might actually pop out of his head.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?!" my dad demanded harshly. "YOU'LL DO NO SUCH THING!"

"I'm eighteen," Liz said calmly. "We're in love. We have been since I met him."

"HE RAPED YOU!" my dad exclaimed, becoming angrier by the second. "TLL HAVE HIM ARRESTED AGAIN!"

"You can't rape the willing," Liz replied in a snarky tone.

If the explosion had been nuclear before, her response made it go thermonuclear.

"ELIZABETH PETRA LOUCKS! THE MAN RAPED YOU! AND I WILL MAKE SURE HE GOES BACK TO PRISON! I'M CALLING THE SHERIFF RIGHT NOW!"

He got up and moved towards the phone.

"Dad," I said calmly, "she's eighteen. The Sheriff can't do anything."

Which wasn't entirely accurate. I suspected if the fact that Liz was Paul's victim came out, it might cause difficulty with his parole, though I was reasonably sure it couldn't be revoked for dating Liz, based on what Melody had said. And all calling the Sheriff would do was ensure a permanent rupture in our family. It might cause trouble with Mr. Zhuravlyov, but Paul was doing his job dutifully, so I felt I could prevent the worst outcome.

"You stay out of this, Mike!" he said tersely, reaching for the phone.

"Dear," Mom said, "don't. Mike is right."

"HAVE YOU BOTH LOST YOUR MINDS?!" he screamed at us.

According to the limited physics I knew, there was nothing past thermonuclear, but I remembered what Oppenheimer had quoted -- '*Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds*', and that's where we were. I had to defuse the situation, if I could, if such an analogy even made sense *after* the bomb had gone off. My mom was calm, although I was sure she was holding in her emotions, and perhaps that was the solution.

"Dad," I said calmly, "let's go talk in your workshop and let Mom talk with Liz, please."

"THERE IS NOTHING TO TALK ABOUT!"

I took a deep breath, "Then let's go to your workshop, and you can scream at me as much as you feel you need to while Mom talks to Liz."

"Peter," Mom said lovingly, "Mike has a point."

Dad glared at Mom, but I could tell he was going to acquiesce. I got up, filled both our coffee cups, and walked out of the kitchen, heading to the basement. I put my dad's coffee cup on his workbench, then sat on the stool in the corner of the workshop to wait for him. He appeared about ten seconds later, his face still red and his eyes still bulging.

"You knew," he said harshly.

I had to be very careful how I answered to protect Liz, Paul, Mr. Zhuravlyov, and myself, though the others were far more important than I was.

"She told me what she was going to tell you today. When she told me, I told her dating Paul was a very, very bad idea. She didn't listen."

"And you didn't call us immediately? Just like before?"

I took a deep breath, "This time it was up to Liz."

"Is this what your mother suspected?" he demanded angrily.

"I have no idea what Mom suspected," I replied. "Liz and I have shared quite a few things since she turned eighteen. I wouldn't want her to reveal what I've told her any more than she would want me to reveal what she's told me. That would break trust. I was wrong three years ago, and I freely admit that. This is different because she's eighteen and living on her own."

"But when you couldn't talk her out of it, you should have said something!"

"To what end?" I asked, remaining as calm as I could. "A permanent rift between Liz and me? I can't do that."

"You know I'm going to find a way to put a stop to this, don't you?"

I took a deep breath and let it out, "I know that's your first response, but she's eighteen, and there isn't really anything you can do about it. And let's say you do find a way to stop it; how do you think Liz will react?"

"When she comes to her senses, she'll thank me for saving her from a CHILD MOLESTER!"

"Dad, I know what the law says and how you feel, but Liz doesn't see it that way."

"The psychologists said that's not uncommon, Mike! A girl who has been sexually abused will behave in ways that otherwise make no sense, and she'll think it's fine and normal. It's not fine, and it's not normal!"

"And you think screaming at her is going to change her mind?"

"And you think talking to me here is going to change MY mind?"

"No, I don't. But yelling and screaming accomplishes nothing. Calm, reasoned discussion, in love, is the only way."

Which was how I'd managed to bring Deacon Vasily down off the ceiling, but in some ways, this was worse because my dad wasn't a clergyman and wouldn't care what the rest of the congregation thought. And he wouldn't have to answer to the bishop the way Deacon Vasily would.

"And you think your mom will change Liz's mind?"

I shook my head, "No, I don't."

"As her parents, we have to put a stop to this, Mike."

"And if you do, that will be the end of any relationship you have with Liz, now or ever."

"You're just going to accept this? Let it happen?"

"I'm powerless to stop it. I recognize that fact, and I love Liz. To me, that presents a horrible dilemma. My choice to resolve the dilemma is to love Liz and do my best to help her, even when she doesn't follow my advice. That's who I am, and I really can't be anyone else. What I learned from what happened three years ago is that the family can get through anything if we love each other."

"You do realize there's a fundamental difference between getting through adversity and allowing a child molester to continue to abuse your sister, right?"

"I know that's how you see it," I replied carefully. "Liz sees it differently."

"And how do YOU see it?"

"I love Liz," I said. "And even when she makes bad decisions, I'll still love her. And I will always be there for her."

"And you would let this man into your home?"

"Would you reject your own grandchildren because you didn't approve of Liz's choice of husband? Punishing the children for the sin of their father? What if I were to marry someone of whom you disapproved?"

"You're playing philosophical games, Mike. It's pure sophistry to avoid what you KNOW to be the truth."

"The only thing I know for sure about any of this is that I love Liz. I'm sinful. She's sinful. Paul Reynolds is sinful. He went to prison for what he did. He'll answer to God for what he did. As a clergyman, even a minor order, my duty is to witness the Gospel and let my light shine in the world, as dim as it might be. I'm not sure what you want me to do."

"Help me put a stop to this!"

"What? Go to Dale's house and get my gun? Then you and I go find Paul and shoot him?"

"Don't be hyperbolic!"

"Am I? You went looking for my gun when you first heard about Paul. I had taken it to Dale's house because I was sure that would be your first reaction. And as much as I believe the Second Amendment gives us the right to own guns, as a

clergyman and future doctor, I'm seeing firsthand why some people think nobody should have access to them, except the military and police."

"I'm not going to kill him."

"Kneecapping will send you to prison, too," I replied with a slight smile.

"I can't not take some kind of action."

"Call Mr. Winston and ask him," I replied. "At least then I won't have to come visit you in prison."

"What do you think should happen to Paul?"

"He served his time and is entitled to rebuild his life as best he can with a felony conviction, a divorce, and the loss of his son. I'd say he paid a heavy price already. And I believe everyone can be saved, Dad. Everyone."

"He can do that without abusing your sister!"

I took another deep breath and let it out.

"I don't know what else to say except to plead with you to do whatever it is you think you need to do in love. That's how I'm going to move forward -- loving Liz unequivocally."

"Thus, washing your hands of the whole situation."

I shook my head, "Not at all, but what I do will be informed, first and foremost, by that love."

"How long have you known?"

"Since Liz told me."

"That's not an answer!"

"It's the only one I choose to give at this point. I can't break faith with Liz. When she quit going to church, I became, in effect, her confessor. I know that's not theologically sound, but it is the role I'm playing. As such, I can't reveal her confidences."

"That's a load of crap, and you know it!"

"Is it? Do you tell Mom things you tell nobody else?"

"That's different! We're married."

"Would you expect Father Herman to tell you Mom's confessions?"

"You aren't a priest, Mike!"

"Obviously," I replied. "But, be that as it may, my role in Liz's life is as her confessor. She needs me for that, and I intend to do that for so long as she stays away from the Church. I pray, daily, that she'll return, but until she does, she needs me, and I will never abandon her or betray her."

I could only imagine the turmoil going through my dad's mind as he glared at me for almost two long minutes.

"I'm calmed down now, Mike. And given what you've said, I think this is best left to your mom and me."

"You stopped yelling, but you haven't calmed down," I replied. "Your face is just as red, and your heart is beating just as fast. And I can see it in your eyes -- they have a look of 'hot death'. And I guarantee you that when I leave, Liz will leave."

"Why? Because she needs you to protect her from her parents?"

"No, because she needs my support and my love."

"It looks the same from where I'm standing."

I imagined it did. Despite over twenty years in the Church, my dad STILL had Calvinist sensibilities about many things, and in his eyes, Paul Reynolds was 'reprobate' and thus was on what AC/DC called a 'Highway to Hell,' and there were no exits, intersections, alternate routes, or places to make a U-turn by which Paul could escape his fate of eternal torment in Hell.

I, on the other hand, had meant it when I said I believed anyone could be saved right up to their last breath. That included Charles Manson and John Wayne Gacy, the most evil individuals I could think of who were still alive. And that belief was the source of my main objection to the death penalty -- it denied both the individual and God the chance to 'work out his or her salvation in fear and trembling'.

I shrugged, "Either way, it is true that if I leave, she'll leave. She asked me here for a reason..."

"To run interference with me," he interrupted.

"To help her in her time of need," I replied. "But it is true that we both knew how you would react."

"With good reason!"

"I understand. And what I'm doing is trying to prevent this family from ripping itself apart at the seams."

"That's your mom's and my job as parents."

"Can the hand say to the foot, 'I have no need of you.?' " I asked.

"Yes, and it says he gave to some specific roles, and our role is as parents."

"And yet, in that role, you cannot say that you have no use for the son. Or the daughter."

"I'm done debating this with you, Mike," Dad said. "You've made it clear which side you've chosen."

I shook my head, "There are no sides. If we have to pick sides, then it's the end of our family."

I picked up my coffee cup and sipped because there really wasn't anything else to say. I wasn't going to change my dad's mind, and he wasn't going to change mine. Ultimately, everything would fall to my mom to convince my dad. I could convince HER if her talk with Liz was fruitless, but that would take some time.

When my dad didn't say anything for over a minute, I stood up.

"I'm going upstairs," I said.

He just stared at me, saying nothing, so I left his workshop and went upstairs, where I found my mom and Liz basically squared off in the kitchen, both looking intent and upset but talking in relatively hushed tones.

"Everything OK?" I asked.

"No, it's certainly not," my mom said. "I take it you calmed your father down."

"No. He's still fuming, but he's stopped screaming. Liz, are you OK?"

"I suppose. We're going around in circles."

"Same as Dad and me."

"You agree with Liz?" Mom asked.

"I told her I thought it was a bad idea, but when she persisted, all I could do was love her."

"How long have you known?"

"Since she told me," I replied. "Dad asked that question, and I could repeat the entire conversation if you want, but in the end, Liz asked for my confidence, and I agreed."

"It was before graduation," Mom said, stating it as fact, not asking a question.

"Mom," I said gently, "none of that matters. What matters now is how we handle this as a family."

"Something for your mother and me to decide," Dad said, coming into the kitchen.

"Then I suppose the thing for me to do is go back to McKinley and wait to hear from you."

Liz stood up, "And I'm going back to Rutherford. Mom, Dad, I'm not changing my mind. This is what I want. This is what I've wanted since I met Paul."

"Elizabeth, sit down!" my dad ordered.

"No," she replied calmly but firmly.

She walked out of the kitchen, ignoring my dad's calls for her to come back, and I followed her out the front door to the driveway.

"Grant Park?" she asked. "Please?"

I nodded and got into my car while she got into hers, and we drove to Grant Park. We parked side by side, and when she got out of her car, she sprinted around to where I was standing and flung herself into my arms, sobbing. I let her cry for the best part of ten minutes, then got the pack of tissues I kept in my glove box and let her blow her nose and wipe her eyes and cheeks.

"What did Mom say?" I asked.

"What didn't she say?" Liz sighed. "That I needed counseling. That Paul abused me and was continuing to abuse me. That I was acting out of rebellion. That I was acting out of spite. She tried every possible argument. She's not going to budge, Mike."

"Let things go for a few days, and I'll try to talk to Mom."

"What if they call the Sheriff?"

"And say what? That their eighteen-year-old daughter is dating a twenty-eight-year-old man? That he's a convicted felon? They can't do anything. The one issue would be the Parole Officer, but Paul told him about your breakfasts, as well as

the date last weekend. I asked my friend Melody to check, and there is nothing illegal about what he's doing. She said her uncle, the attorney, told her this kind of thing happens fairly often with statutory rape cases. My concern is Mr. Zhuravlyov, but I can speak with him. You know his notions about teenage girls!"

Liz laughed softly, despite her tears, "If he could get away with it, he'd be chasing every teenage girl in the church!"

"I believe Mrs. Zhuravlyova has that issue firmly in hand."

"Or somewhere else!" Liz smirked. "Those old Russian women keep their husbands' balls in jars next to their beds!"

"Not just the old ones," I replied.

"What did Dad say?"

"Same as Mom, but more strident and more Calvinist. He was particularly offended when I said I wouldn't tell because I was, in effect, your confessor."

"You aren't a priest!" Liz objected.

"Which is exactly what Dad said. And yet, it's true that my role is as your confessor. You tell me everything, and you expect me to keep it completely to myself. I share everything with Clarissa, but only because you gave me express permission."

"She'd make the perfect wife for you, if only she weren't lesbian."

"Tell me something I don't already know," I replied.

"So now what?"

"Go back to Rutherford and go about your life."

"What about paying for school?"

"Let's see how it goes, but if push comes to shove, I can afford to pay your tuition."

"No, Mikey! You need that money!"

"Without going into detail, I'm in a far, far better position than I expected to be. And if Mom and Dad decide not to contribute to medical school, I'll just borrow more. I'll make plenty of money eventually, and a bit of suffering between now and then to help you is worth it. Heck, I could cancel my vacation in Europe and that would provide enough for you to take three or four classes, at least."

"Don't do that! I can figure something out."

"Liz, I love you, and I'm going to make sure you're taken care of, no matter what. Believe me, I have an option I didn't have before."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't worry about it now, but if push comes to shove, I can get more than enough money to take care of you until you and Paul marry."

"But how?"

"Don't worry about it, please."

The obvious solution was to marry Elizaveta as soon as possible after her sixteenth birthday. She could go to Europe with me instead of Lara, and after that, I'd have almost no living expenses. That would allow me to provide for Liz with no trouble. It might not be the best way to decide between Lara and Elizaveta, but if push came to shove, I'd make that decision and have no regrets; Liz was that important to me. That said, Elizaveta's cooking and her teasing about owing me kisses promised that I wouldn't regret marrying her.

"What do you think will happen with Mom and Dad?"

"At some point, Mom will call me, and that will be the opening I need to begin working on her. Until then, just go to work, spend time with your friends, date Paul, and don't worry about anything at home."

"But what about you?"

"If Mom and Dad force me to choose between them and you, I choose you! Nobody should ever have to make that choice, and if someone tries to force the issue, it's the ones forcing the issue who have to lose. You, Paul, and your kids will always be welcome at my home. Period. I love you, and nothing is going to change that."

"Thanks, Mikey."

We hugged again, each got into our cars, and headed in opposite directions.



July 22, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"How bad?" Clarissa asked when I walked into Doctor Blahnik's house.

"As I expected. My dad flew off the handle in a rage. My mom was just as upset but was calmer, at least externally. I'm pretty much *persona non grata* at the moment because I refused to agree with my parents' desire to somehow forcibly end the relationship. My mom at least talked to Liz; my dad screamed at her until I got him to go to his workshop to talk."

"How did you leave it?"

"When my dad insisted that they would decide for the family about how to respond, I decided to leave. Liz left at the same time."

"In other words, your opinion doesn't matter?"

"Not to my dad, though I bet you anything you care to wager that if I had agreed with them, THEN my opinion would have been used to try to sway Liz. I basically refused to choose sides, so my dad chose for me. Given what amounted to an ultimatum, Liz wins because I love her and won't abandon her. They see that as supporting her decision. They can't separate me loving Liz from me supporting her choices."

"Do they know you helped Paul?"

"No, and the one minor success I had was that my dad didn't call the Sheriff. I don't think he will, but even if he does, Liz is eighteen, and the Parole Officer knows that she and Paul had their first date last Saturday. And you know what Melody said about that before school let out. The only potential issue is Mr. Zhuravlyov, but I think I can manage that situation should it occur."

"So now what?"

"I told Liz to go about her life and wait for Mom to call me, which I expect her to do in the next couple of weeks. Liz's one concern was if my parents refused to

pay for her junior college classes, but I promised I'd pay her tuition until she and Paul were settled, even if it meant I had to take extreme measures."

"Extreme measures?"

"If I marry Elizaveta, I won't have any financial obligations and can use my savings to help Liz."

"Seriously? It would come down to money?"

"I told you about her cooking and her teasing about the kiss."

Clarissa laughed, "And from THAT, you deduce she's going to be a handful in bed?"

I shrugged, "I'm pretty easy to satisfy in that regard."

Clarissa laughed, "Most guys are, according to the gossip in the girls' locker room in High School! But you're more emotional about sex than most guys. Closeness is what you want more than blinding orgasms, though you don't object to those. Do you really think your parents will cut her off?"

"I have no idea. I'm hoping they'll be like your parents in that regard."

"What would you think of going to see them with me?"

"I thought you weren't welcome unless you changed your orientation."

"I need to make an effort, just as you will with your mom."

"I'll be happy to go with you; we just need to work around everything else."

"What about the weekend after Lara visits? We'd stay Saturday night. If not at my parents' house, then at a motel not far from their house."

"Whatever you need, Lissa. You put complete trust in me when you came out to me, and I promised to support you, no matter what."

Clarissa smiled, "I see a pattern here."

"You and Liz."

"At the moment, but really, anyone who you see as being harmed. Your response is always to ask yourself what love requires of you, and then you do it."

"I believe I've read a bit of guidance on that matter," I replied with a smile.

"Yes, but to actually live it out is something altogether different. Do you need anything from me?"

"Always," I replied. "But I was thinking of soaking in the tub upstairs to relax."

"Any way I could join you?"

"That seems like the shower question," I replied.

"It's no different from you spooning with me naked in bed. The shower is different because it involves a lot of intimate touching and is more active. Sleeping and sitting are passive. You could call Lara for a ruling if you want."

"It's not sex, or sexual, or erotic, so I think it qualifies, despite it being something which would scandalize my church."

"It's private, Petrovich, and I'm sure not going to tell anyone at church!"

"Then let's go."



July 24, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday, I was sitting on a bench outside the Quick Mart finishing my lunch when I was surprised by Maggie walking up the sidewalk towards me, accompanied by Hannah and Violet.

"Hi," I said when they reached the bench.

"Hi, Mike," Hannah and Violet said.

Maggie remained silent, and it was clear she wasn't happy to be there. That told me that Hannah and Violet had forced the issue, which didn't make ME happy, but there was little I could do about it now.

"Go on!" Hannah said, giving Maggie a nudge with her shoulder.

Maggie glared at her and said nothing. Hannah and Violet walked away, leaving Maggie standing in front of me with her arms crossed.

"Hi, Maggie," I said quietly. "I have to go back inside in about five minutes."

"Good," she replied flatly.

"I'll talk if you want," I replied. "Otherwise, I can go into the store, and you walk away."

I waited a minute, and when she said nothing, I got up and wordlessly went into the store, tossed the brown paper bag I'd brought my lunch in into the trash in the break room, and put on my smock. I went to the front counter, relieved Grace, told her she could take her lunch, and rang up the remaining customer. I wasn't surprised when Hannah and Violet came into the store.

"Why did you walk away?" Hannah asked.

"Because Maggie didn't say anything to me other than 'Good' in response to me saying I had to be back inside the store in five minutes. She just stood and glared at me."

"She's being stupid!" Violet said. "One of the girls for sure is Jocelyn!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake," I grouched. "Did you tell her that?"

"Yes. And the other one is a girl nobody knows. Pretty, brown hair, nice tan, and you were walking arm-in-arm."

"My friend Dona from the dorm," I replied. "We play mini golf on Saturday mornings. She hangs out with Jocelyn, Clarissa, and me."

"You weren't steady with Maggie, right?" Violet asked.

I shook my head, "No."

Hannah looked around to make sure no customers were near.

"I told her that if she was cool with you fucking Violet and me, then she was being stupid because it wasn't like they had pictures of you in bed with that girl, and even if you DID fuck her, that was no reason to throw everything away!"

"And Liz told us you and Jocelyn were good friends since kindergarten," Violet added. "Like you and Clarissa, but longer."

"There isn't much I can do at this point," I said. "And I'm not sure it's wise to even try."

"Let us talk to her again," Hannah said.

A customer came to the counter, so the girls stepped aside while I rang up the purchase and bagged it.

"You can, but I don't think it'll do any good, and even so, the way she treated me has been pretty bad. Not talking is not cool."

"But you'll talk to her if she wants to talk?"

"Yes. But no promises beyond that."

"At least you'll talk! She has to get back to work. We'll try to get her to come see you later."

"It'll have to be after 9:00pm," I said. "I play chess on Tuesdays."

"We'll talk to her."

Another customer came to the counter, and the girls left. I waited on five more customers before Grace came back inside.

"What was that about?" she asked during a lull about thirty minutes later.

"Maggie's friends trying to fix things. But they aren't fixable."

"Even for a hot redhead with green eyes?" Grace teased. "I know guys who would KILL to get into her panties!"

"Given my current perspective on that topic, it's not particularly relevant."

"Seriously? If that chick offered to fuck, you'd say, 'No thanks, I took a vow of chastity'?"

"Pretty much."

Grace shook her head, "Now THAT is a crime against humanity! Are we playing chess tonight?"

"That was my plan unless you don't want to."

"I have to keep trying! I'll beat you by the end of the Summer! I just need to convince you to offer a reward!"

"If you're going to win, then you don't need the encouragement," I replied with a grin.

"I should be able to claim a prize!"

"Don't you think I'd try even harder if that was at risk?" I asked.

"I still say you should give me a chance!"

"As tempting as that is, I made a promise to someone that I need to keep."

"I thought you weren't steady with anyone."

"I'm not, but that doesn't change the fact that I committed to remain chaste."

"Weird."

She went back to her tasks, and I pulled out the folder of orders and receiving documents and began reconciling them. When our shift was over, I went to karate. After practice, I headed to Grace's house where we played chess and ate pizza before I headed back to the dorms, having won all three games. My skills were coming back, and I wondered if I could make time to play in the future.

When I arrived at the dorm, I went to Jocelyn and Dona's room, and they joined me in my room, with Clarissa showing up a few minutes later. We hung out until about 11:00pm when I walked Clarissa back to Doctor Blahnik's house.

"Hannah and Violet made a last-ditch effort with Maggie today," I said. "Maggie wasn't having any of it, though."

"What happened?" Clarissa asked.

I explained the brief encounter and what Hannah and Violet said.

"And honestly," I concluded, "I'm happy they didn't show up at the dorm."

"Why not just tell them you're seeing Lara and Elizaveta?"

"I'll tell Maggie; it seems tacky to tell Hannah and Violet. I did discourage them, but they seem determined to get Maggie to talk to me."

"No flirting?"

I shook my head, "No. They knew the rules -- as soon as Maggie moved to McKinley, that was the end of it."

"Do you think that's the REAL problem? That you slept with her friends then refused to sleep with her?"

"It's possible, but it doesn't fit the facts. If that were the problem, the whole thing with her parents makes no sense."

"What if that's just a pretext?"

"It's possible, I guess, but Maggie made it clear that going to bed together meant exclusivity and working towards marriage. I wasn't ready to do that and couldn't without her first converting."

"Maybe it's the whole package," Clarissa said. "She expected things to go a specific way when she moved here, and each of these things just piled on. That would make Hannah and Violet a problem after the fact, if you get what I mean."

"Maybe. But this is all idle speculation. I'm basically in agreement with you, Tasha, and Jocelyn that it's best just to let it alone. If she comes and talks to me, she can explain, but in the end, barring complete disaster, I'm either going to be with Lara or Elizaveta."

"What about Europe?"

"If it's going to be Elizaveta, we'll marry before the trip, and she could come along. As for Lara, it would all depend on timing. We'd probably wait until after her birthday just to make things easier. She'll be eighteen next May."

"Do you have a preference at the moment?"

"I've done my best to try to keep things neutral in my mind. It wouldn't be fair to either of them to pick a favorite before I got to know them better. And I have to

be careful not to allow the fact that I'm seeing Elizaveta regularly right now to give her an undue advantage."

"Are there any plans for this weekend?"

"Not that I'm aware of," I replied. "I'll talk to Liz tomorrow evening and see how she's doing. If she needs me, I'll go see her."

"You aren't going to call your parents?"

"No. I'm fairly sure Mom will call me in the next ten days. If not, then I'll consider calling her. And speaking of moms, I'm glad yours decided it was OK for us to come visit."

"I'm concerned she thinks I'm going to tell her I've gone straight."

"Yes, but she did agree. One step at a time."

"True."

We reached Doctor Blahnik's house, exchanged a hug, and after Clarissa went inside, I headed back to the dorm.



July 26, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday evening, after karate, I headed to the Kozlovs' house for dinner, though this time, her maternal grandparents joined us. Elizaveta served a traditional Russian meal, starting with «щи» (shchi), having «пельмени» (*pelmeni*) as the main course with peas on the side, and finishing with tart apple

«пастила» (*pastila*). ("cabbage soup", "dumplings with meat", "pressed fruit paste")

"Everything was VERY good," I said when we finished eating.

"Thank you, Subdeacon!" Elizaveta said.

"You're welcome."

As we had the last time, while the women cleaned up, Mr. Kozlov and I went to his study, and I accepted a half-glass of brandy to drink. I would have preferred to help with the dishes, but that didn't seem to be the pattern with the Kozlovs. What happened once I married would be up to me, and I'd share in the chores to the extent I could, given my other commitments.

"Subdeacon, I'd like you to play golf with me," Mr. Kozlov said.

"Other than mini golf, I've never touched a club or ball," I replied.

"The club has a pro who could give you lessons. It's a necessary skill for doctors!"

"I don't have a lot of free time," I countered. "It would almost have to be either Monday after work or on Sunday right after Sunday school."

"Monday would be good. Come to the club, you'll have a lesson, then we'll have dinner. What time can you be there?"

"Around 4:30pm. What should I wear?"

"Comfortable slacks and a polo shirt. For now, your tennis shoes will be fine. We'll provide clubs for the lessons."

"I'll be there," I said.

"Good! Did you receive your scores yet?"

"No. I expect them next week. I did receive my interview invitation from McKinley Medical School, and that's set for September 13th."

"That's your first choice, right?"

"Yes. And with a 4.0, solid MCAT scores, and a good interview, I believe I'll be accepted."

"Have you thought about going to a more prestigious school?"

"Yes, but I intend to practice here, and I think it's better to train here. In the end, nobody coming into the ER is going to ask which medical school I attended before allowing me to treat them!"

"Quite so!" he laughed.

"And the people here need good doctors who love being here."

"Also true."

"Papa?" Elizaveta said from the door. "The kitchen is clean."

"I believe that's your cue, Subdeacon! I'll spend some time with my father-in-law."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll see you at church and then on Monday."

I left the study with Elizaveta, and we went to the backyard, where her mother and grandmother were in the garden.

"What is Monday, Subdeacon?"

"A golf lesson."

"Papa says that's important for a doctor."

I chuckled, "I'm not sure it's THAT important, but a lot of doctors do play golf."

"He likes you."

"And you?"

"Of course! Don't be silly! You know I like you, Subdeacon!"

"Please, I want you to call me by my name when I'm not wearing my cassock."

"Mikhail? Or may I be familiar?"

"You may, «Зайчик» (*zaychuk*)!" ("bunny rabbit")

Elizaveta laughed softly and blushed, "You're teasing me!"

"Do you have a name you prefer to that?"

"No, I like it...Mishka!" she said with another soft laugh.

"You're very cute, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)!" I replied. ("kitten")

"Now you're just teasing me! You owe me another kiss!"

XV. Fewest Strokes Possible

July 29, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Your mom hasn't called you yet?" Tasha asked when our small group gathered at her apartment on Sunday afternoon.

"No," I replied. "But I figured it would take a couple of weeks of not hearing from me or Liz before she decides she needs to talk to me."

"You're doing OK?"

"Yes. It's not all that different from you and Sasha, except that your dad figured it out quickly."

"If by that you mean you shamed him into behaving as a Christian should, then yes."

"How is Sasha doing?"

"She wishes they could be in their own place instead of at my parents' house, but until she graduates, that's difficult because she needs my mom or grandmother to watch Viktoriya, and it's much easier to do that at home."

"So the idea of being able to make love in her own bed isn't so attractive now?" I chuckled.

"Would you like to live with your parents once you were married?"

"Not particularly," I replied. "But in her case, finishing High School is important, and she needs the help."

"That would be true of Elizaveta as well," Tasha said.

"Yes, and Lara will have two more years of college, so either way, my wife will be in school. The main difference is no babies before they're out of school!"

"But lots of practice!" Tasha teased.

"And you'll do the same thing when you and Nikolas marry!"

"When will that be?" Jocelyn asked.

"Probably not until next Summer so that Nikolas has a job. Because he's at OSU, it's too difficult to live here in McKinley and drive to Columbus every day, and living there would make it difficult for me to drive to work every day."

"Bummer for you," I teased.

"Don't be «некультурный» (*nekulturny*)!" she squealed. ("inappropriate")

"If there is one place I can be «некультурный» (*nekulturny*), it's here!"
("inappropriate")

"Jocelyn, how are things with Bill?" Tasha asked.

"Progressing; the same as Clarissa and Abby."

"And you're taking Dona on those Friday night dates?" Tasha asked.

"Yes. And playing mini golf with her on Saturdays. I like her, and she's fun to be around, but she's not Orthodox and has no desire to go to church."

"Ask him about what he's doing tomorrow," Clarissa said.

"I have a golf lesson," I replied.

Tasha laughed, "Golf?! You?"

"I know," I replied with a shrug. "But Mr. Kozlov wants me to learn to play, and it is a pretty common thing for doctors."

"Are you going to have time for golf, karate, and chess?" she asked.

"Something will have to give," I replied. "And I think it'll be karate. Running is good exercise, and I can change the times and days I run to accommodate my schedule and even run on a treadmill if I need to. But we'll see how things go before I make any permanent decisions."

"Golf is way more expensive than karate," Jocelyn observed.

"That is something to consider," I replied. "It won't be a big deal ten years from now, but in the interim, it would be."

"We'll be gone Friday night and most of Saturday," Clarissa said. "Mike is taking me home to see my parents."

"Where's that?" Jocelyn asked.

"Sylvania. I haven't seen them since I came out to them a year ago."

"They're ready to deal with it?"

"Who knows?"

"All of our parents seem to have difficulty with our choices," Jocelyn observed.

"They're not quite ready for us to be adults," I said. "That was completely clear from my talk with my dad. Liz being eighteen didn't matter to him any more than it mattered when I turned eighteen."

"My mom and dad have NO room to talk," Jocelyn said. "I went to my biological parents' wedding!"

"As did Viktoriya!" Tasha added mirthfully. "Much to my father's dismay!"

"He tried his best to prevent that," I chuckled. "But nature had other ideas. I take it Sasha's blood pressure has returned to normal?"

"Yes. She's perfectly healthy and is trying to lose the weight she gained."

"She's nursing, right?" Jocelyn asked.

"Yes. Once school starts, that will be an issue, but she can express milk for feedings while she's at school."

"Do what?" I asked.

All three girls laughed.

"You can be such a boy at times," Jocelyn laughed. "She'll use a breast pump to remove milk from her breast and store it in a bottle in the fridge for Viktoriya's midday feeding."

"Things I had NO clue about," I replied. "Hopefully, stuff like that will be covered in our Reproductive Physiology class."

"A man admitting he has no clue!" Jocelyn teased. "Now there's a first!"

"Oh, please!" I protested. "How many times did I admit that to you over the years? Especially about girls!"

"And sex!"

Tasha and Clarissa laughed.

"You trained him well, Jocelyn!" Clarissa smirked.

"Yes, you did!" Tasha said primly.

I laughed hard for a good minute.

"Natalya Vasilyevna you are «некультурный» (*nekulturny*)!" I declared. ("inappropriate")

"This is a special situation, and sadly, soon enough, it will change. When you and I both marry, we'll need to behave differently."

"Unfortunately," I sighed.



July 30, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Michael, this is our PGA pro, Ron Franks," Viktor Kozlov said to me on Monday at the country club.

"Hi, Mr. Franks," I said.

He smiled, "Call me Ron, everyone does. I'll take it from here, Viktor."

"OK. Subdeacon, come find me in the Clubhouse when you're finished."

"Yes, Sir."

He walked away, and I turned to face Ron.

"OK. We'll start with a brief overview of the game. Can you tell me the object?"

"Complete the course in the fewest strokes possible. I've played mini golf, so THAT much I know."

"Good. Anything else you know?"

"Besides having seen *Caddyshack*?" I asked with a grin.

"That might not be the best instructional video!" he said with a wry smile.

"Then, beyond that, not really. Other than meeting Mr. Kozlov for lunch here, this is actually my first time on a golf course."

"Then let's take ten minutes and review the basic concepts."

He described the layout of the course, including tees, fairways, rough, hazards, and greens, as well as the range of clubs which might be used, and the basic rules. We then went to the driving range, and he handed me a club.

"This is a 5-iron," he said. "It's a middle-range club and is generally used from the fairway. It and the 7-iron are pretty much your go-to clubs for distances from about 120 yards up to around 200 yards. The most common use is for the second shot on a par 4 or the third shot on a par 5. Let's work on a basic stance and swing, and we'll take it from there."

"How many clubs are usually in a bag?"

"Fourteen, and you can select the clubs which you find most useful. Normally, that's the odd-numbered irons starting with the 3-iron; a pitching wedge; a sand wedge; a putter; a 1-wood, or driver; a 3-wood, or fairway wood; and then whatever other clubs you find useful, be they even-numbered irons, wedges, or woods. But don't worry about that at the moment.

"A bag of fourteen clubs is heavy, so for a casual game, you might only carry a driver, 3-wood, 5-7-9 irons, pitching and sand wedges, and a putter. In theory, you could play the entire course with a 5 iron and putter, but the eight-club bag is reasonably lightweight and easy to carry for eighteen holes. We don't allow golf carts except for senior players. Let me show you the stance."

He showed me how to 'address' the ball, focusing on the position of my feet and ensuring that my knees, hips, forearms, shoulders, and eyes were all aligned parallel to a line which went through the ball to the point for which I was aiming. He pointed out that the width of my stance would change based on the club I was using, but for the moment, he wanted to just deal with the 5-iron.

Once I had the stance correct, he showed me the proper grip, then how to align the club. He picked up the ball and had me take several practice swings, correcting me each time. He placed the ball back on the spot and asked me to hit it. I did, and it flew about 35° from the straight line.

"That would be a slice," he said with a gentle smile. "And it's pretty common for beginners. Your swing was a bit off, and you struck the ball with the clubface 'open', which resulted in a slice. Let me see your grip in the proper stance, please?"

I showed him, and he nodded.

"OK. First tip, when you grip, check the 'V' between your thumb and forefinger of your right hand points to your shoulder. Second, you rotated your hands a bit too much when you made your backswing. I know that might feel right, but it opens the clubface. Let's try again."

He put down the ball and had me hit it, and this time, it only went about 10° off true.

"Much better. You're still rotating the club a bit. Let's hit a dozen or so and try to keep a proper grip, and don't rotate your hands on the backswing. Try to be smooth as well."

I hit the twelve balls, most of which went off the center line, and Ron made some adjustments to my stance, then had me hit the rest of the bucket of balls, making minor corrections along the way. By the time I was done, I could hit the ball relatively straight, though the distance was lacking.

"We'll work on distance next time," he said. "Your stance and swing are the keys to playing an enjoyable round of golf. If you develop bad habits, you'll find yourself frustrated and be one of those people who think 'golf' is a 'four-letter word' or a way to ruin a nice walk in the countryside. If you develop good habits, you'll enjoy a round of golf with your doctor and lawyer friends, and it'll be a wonderful social time. See you next Monday at the same time?"

"Sounds good," I replied.

We shook hands and I went into the Clubhouse, found Mr. Kozlov, and we went to the main dining room to have dinner.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"I haven't been banned from the course," I grinned. "So, I suppose I did OK. I'm having trouble with slicing."

"Normal for a first-timer and not all that uncommon amongst amateurs. It just takes a lot of practice. After a few more lessons, we'll play a round. Of course, once the weather turns, golf is out unless we go to Myrtle Beach or someplace warm like that. What did you think?"

"Ask me when we play," I replied. "It's kind of like trying to judge what karate would be like from the first lesson."

"Did Ron tell you to come next Monday?"

"Yes."

"Good. We'll have dinner again. I'll see if some doctor friends of mine might join us."

"I'd like that," I replied.

I was, very obviously, being drawn into Mr. Kozlov's orbit, and he was showing me the value of being there, with the obvious goal of me marrying Elizaveta. And if I took it as a sales pitch, I'd have to say he was doing a very good job. And Elizaveta herself was doing a good job as well, showing off her cooking and baking skills. And her teasing about kissing indicated she, like certain other conservative Orthodox girls I knew, had the desire to enjoy what Tasha always

called 'the marriage bed', though Tasha and I had made extensive use of it without actually being married.

"What courses are you taking this year?"

"Cellular biology, analytical chemistry with a lab, reproductive physiology, and Modern Social Issues during Fall semester. Then in the Spring, physical chemistry with a lab, a biology stats course, Russian Literature, and abnormal psychology. Normally, we'd have a research project, but the one we completed last year covers both."

"Who did you do your research with last year?"

"Clarissa and Sandy. Clarissa is the young woman who has come to church with me fairly regularly. We intend to go to medical school together and do our Residencies together, and ultimately, practice together."

"She's just a friend?"

I nodded, "A very close friend. We've been studying together since Freshman year. Elizaveta has spoken to her a number of times."

"And your closest male friend?"

"Is at UW-Madison, but I have some good friends at Taft, though none of them are pre-med, which is why they aren't study partners. We have a fairly close group of about a dozen students who hang out together. Only Sandy and Pete are a serious couple. The rest of us are just close friends, and most of them were at church for Pascha."

Well, Robby and Lee were a couple, but I wasn't about to get into that discussion.

"I've met your parents, but I don't know what they do."

"My dad is a supervisor in the Harding County Property Division, and my mom is a legal secretary."

"You have a sister, right?"

"Liz. She's living in Rutherford now. She's working as a hostess and will attend Rutherford Junior College in the Fall. She's studying accounting."

"I'd like to invite your family to dinner. Would you ask your parents?"

I'd talked to Lara the previous evening about the likelihood that we wouldn't be able to visit my parents, and it hadn't been an issue for her, but this was different. I wasn't quite sure how to resolve the issue, given I wasn't really speaking to my parents.

"I expect to talk to them later this week, so I'll ask them."

"Good."

The waiter came and took our order, and once he'd done so, we continued our small talk as we got to know each other. When we finished our meal, I thanked him, said I'd see him at church, and on Thursday, then headed back to campus.



August 1, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Mike!" Clarissa exclaimed. "Our results are here!"

"I'm about to leave for church," I replied. "I'll open mine later."

"What?!" Jocelyn demanded.

I laughed, "Wow, you're gullible!"

"I'll show YOU gullible, Mik!" she said menacingly.

Clarissa handed me my envelope, which had been sent to Doctor Blahnik's house, as that was my legal residence.

"You first, Lissa," I said.

She nodded and carefully opened the envelope. Her eyes lit up, and a broad smile spread across her face.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Biology 13; Chemistry 13; Physics 10; Science 13; Reading 13; Quantitative 12; 74 composite, which is the 97th percentile!"

"Wow!" Jocelyn gushed. "Congrats!"

"Great job, Lissa!" I exclaimed.

"Your turn, Petrovich!" Clarissa declared.

I opened the envelope and extracted the contents. I quickly scanned them and realized I'd beat Clarissa by a single point.

"Biology 14; Chemistry 14; Physics 10; Science 13; Reading 12; Quantitative 12; 75 composite, which is the 98th percentile."

"Congrats, Petrovich! One point! You beat me in biology and Chemistry, but I beat you in reading."

"There were no science fiction questions," I replied.

"Great job, Mik!" Jocelyn said, hopping up to hug and kiss me.

"Those are really good scores, right?" Dona asked.

"98th and 97th percentile means only one or two percent of students who took the test did better," I replied. "That means we'll get into basically any medical school we want, but we want McKinley Medical School here."

"Neither of you did very well in physics," Jocelyn observed.

"A score of 10 is basically average," Clarissa replied. "It's pretty much what both of us expected. We studied with the intent of being average there but excelling in chemistry, biology, and general science. It worked."

"Physics doesn't seem all that important with regard to being a doctor," Dona said.

"Part of it is ensuring you have a solid science background," Clarissa said. "But there are advances in what's being called 'nuclear medicine' for treating cancer and tumors. But neither of us is going to do much in that area."

"What's next then?" Dona asked.

"Interviews," I replied. "We're both interviewing at McKinley Medical School on September 13th. We'll hear from the other schools very soon. And I hate to read my results and run, but I need to get to church."

"Celebrate with Chinese food and wine at Doctor Blahnik's house?" Clarissa asked.

Everyone agreed, and I left for church, where I shared my results first with Father Nicholas, then after Vespers, with Tasha and Viktor Kozlov, both of whom congratulated me. I left the church and headed to Doctor Blahnik's house, where the girls were waiting with Chinese food.

"Just a splash of wine," I said when Jocelyn began pouring.

"Sticking to your self-imposed limits?"

"I'm going to abstain almost completely once I finish my second year of medical school," I said.

"What about you, Clarissa?" Jocelyn asked.

"I'm not sure, but I certainly have to be careful. I'm just not sure complete abstinence is necessary."

"I'll probably allow myself things like champagne on New Year's or some drinks when I'm on vacation," I said. "But if there's a chance I'll be called in, then I have to have 0.0."

"That makes sense," Jocelyn said. "Are you going to call your parents with your test scores?"

"I hadn't decided. I'll call Liz after we eat. I'll tell Lara when she arrives tomorrow. I talked to her last night to confirm our plans."

"But not seeing your parents?"

"I expected my mom to call, but she hasn't. I suppose I'll call to tell her my MCAT results and see what she says. Lara and I will go see Liz on Saturday, no matter what."

"It would be the right gesture to call your mom," Jocelyn said.

We toasted our success, ate our dinner, and I went to use the phone in Milena's room to make my calls. I called Liz first, and she shrieked so loudly I had to move the handset from my ear.

"Mikey! You did great!"

"And I'm now permanently deaf in one ear," I teased.

"Sorry! How did Clarissa do?"

"What?" I teased, pretending I couldn't hear her.

"Oh, stop!" Liz laughed. "I know you heard me!"

"I did," I chuckled. "Clarissa scored only one point lower. Basically equally well."

"Cool! Are you still planning on breakfast on Saturday?"

"Yes. We'll meet you at the restaurant at 7:00am. Did you hear from Hannah or Violet?"

"They told me what happened. I can't believe Maggie reacted the way she did. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for. Just so you know, I'm going to call Mom to tell her about my test scores."

"I figured you would. She tried to talk to Emmy, but Emmy told her she wasn't going to get involved."

"Good. That should be everyone's response. See you Saturday morning!"

We said 'goodbye', I pressed the switchhook, then dialed my parents' house.

"Loucks residence," Mom said when she answered.

"It's Mike," I said. "I called to tell you I scored a 75 on the MCAT, which is the 98th percentile."

"That's very good," she replied. "Congratulations."

"Lara's going to be visiting this weekend, and I had planned to bring her to meet you, possibly for lunch on Saturday, but I'm not sure I'm welcome."

"Your father is extremely upset with you."

"And you?" I asked.

"I think you're enabling Liz," she said flatly.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Right, because me cutting off all contact with her would change her mind? Not hardly! And I'll point out that if she DID have doubt in her mind, the way you and dad reacted would only serve to reinforce her determination to do what she's doing!"

"So now it's OUR fault?"

"That is not what I'm saying, and you know it! I'm saying you aren't going to change her mind, and the harder you push, the more determined she's going to be. Liz is stubborn in ways Dad could only imagine being."

"I just don't understand how you can go from calling the Sheriff to accepting the situation."

"For exactly the reason I just gave -- me objecting won't change Liz's mind. That left me with two options -- the one you chose and the one I chose. And, to be honest, that meant I had only one choice -- to love my sister and support her the best I know how no matter what."

"She listens to you, Mike!"

"Yes, she usually does, but not about Paul. I tried, then made my peace with the idea. I want to see Liz. I'll have nieces or nephews I want to see. Whether or not I approve of Liz's husband is immaterial to either of those things. I'll point out that there's always a possibility you won't approve of my choice, either, and where will that leave you?"

"There's a difference between not liking someone and them being a felon convicted of raping my daughter!"

"That is the State's version of events; Liz vehemently disagrees. She never wavered from that belief despite the incredible pressure that the quack in Columbus, who I won't name, put on her. In the end, it's your decision as to what happens in the future. If you want me to bring Lara to the house for lunch, I will, but we're not discussing Liz in any way, shape, or form."

"I can't guarantee your father won't."

"Then we're not coming. Let him know my scores, please."

"Mike..." she protested weakly.

"There's nothing left for me to say," I replied. "I'm not going to change my mind about loving Liz and supporting her; the cost of changing my mind is far too high and goes against every fibre of my being."

"And the cost of your relationship with us?"

"I didn't make the decision, Mom; you and Dad did. I can't change who I am. And who I am is someone who believes that Christian love requires me to do everything in my power to help and support Liz."

"At any cost?"

"Gee, you mean like taking the opposite position, despite the cost?"

"Mike..." Mom sighed.

"I'm not sure what you want me to do. Well, no, that's not true; I know what you want me to do, but I simply can't do it. My friends are waiting, so I'm going to say 'goodbye'. I'll let you know which medical school I'm accepted to when it happens. And you'll be invited to my wedding, but so will Liz and Paul, who I'm sure will attend. You'll have to decide what to do. Goodbye."

There was silence, and I wasn't sure what to do, so I hung up. I went to the bathroom and splashed cool water on my face, dried off, and then went back downstairs to join my friends.

"I can see from your face that it didn't go well," Jocelyn said.

"My dad is still extremely upset, according to my mom, and she thinks somehow that if I change my response towards Liz, she's going to break up with Paul."

"Your mom was never that way before!" Jocelyn protested.

"The only other time she behaved irrationally is when the idiot psychologist used a rhetorical trick to make her think I'd abused Liz three years ago."

"What?!" Dona gasped.

"It's a long story," Jocelyn said. "But the short version is Liz was undergoing counseling for some issues, and the psychologist took something Mike and Liz said to each other out of context and convinced Mike's mom, Family Services, and the County Prosecutor that Mike had abused Liz. The allegations were categorically false, and everything was retracted, but for a time, Mike's mom was behaving just as irrationally."

"That's crazy!" Dona exclaimed. "They were going to charge you for something you didn't do?"

I nodded, "And which both Liz and I denied, AND other psychologists found not to be true. In the end, all of it was dropped and has disappeared from any records."

"I'm here for the Summer because my parents objected to my relationship with Mike," Jocelyn said.

"And mine to me being lesbian," Clarissa added. "Mike's taking me to see them in a week, and hopefully, they'll get over their fantasy that I'm just going to go straight one day."

"My parents are totally cool," Dona said. "I've never had any trouble with them."

"That was true for me until after graduation," I said. "Then all the bad stuff with Liz went down and my relationship with my parents became strained. We had been moving forward until Liz broke the news about Paul."

"Mike?" Doctor Blahnik called out, coming into the music room. "I saw the mail today. How did you do?"

"75, which is the 98th percentile. Clarissa scored a 74, which is the 97th percentile."

"Congratulations to both of you! That's very impressive!"

"Thanks," I replied.

"Thanks!" Clarissa added.

"I'll leave you all alone!"

She left and went upstairs, and about thirty minutes later, Jocelyn, Dona, and I headed back to the dorm.



August 2, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday afternoon, the phone at the Quick Mart rang, and I was surprised to find my grandfather calling.

"Hello, «Дедушка» (*dedushka*)," I said. ("Grandfather")

"Mischa, I hear you will be in Rutherford on Saturday."

"That's correct."

"Come to the house for lunch, please. And bring your newest lady friend."

"What time?"

"How about 11:00am? Your grandmother will have lunch for us at noon."

"I'll see you then, «Дедушка» (*dedushka*)!"

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up. I was reasonably sure my mom had spoken to him, though it was possible that it had been Lara's father or grandfather. I'd have to be VERY careful how I presented Lara, as I didn't want to force anyone's hand, nor did I want my hand forced at this stage. I suspected, with a fair amount of certainty, that it was about Liz and about the rift with my parents.

I finished out the day at the Quick Mart, then headed back to the dorm to change for dinner at the Kozlovs'. A note by my door said that Hannah had called, and I debated whether I should call her or not. In the end, I elected not to, showered, changed, and headed to dinner with Elizaveta and her family.

Dinner was fantastic, and the dessert to die for, and after the meal I spent time with Mr. Kozlov before Elizaveta and I were permitted to spend time together.

"How many children do you want, Mishka?" Elizaveta asked.

"I always thought two was a good number, but I'm not adamant about that. How many did you want?"

"Three, at least, maybe four. It would be nice to have two little boys and two little girls."

"If you feed them, they get big!" I teased.

Elizaveta laughed, "Of course! But they start little!"

"True. When would you want to start"

"As soon as I graduate from High School. I really want to be a mom. Is that OK?"

"That's about the time I'll start my clinical work -- either in a hospital or doctor's office. It's likely I'll need to do some of that in Cincinnati or Columbus."

"Why?"

"Well, for my gynecology and obstetrics Clerkship or Sub-Internship, I need to do them at a Roman Catholic hospital so that I don't have to worry about being involved in elective abortions."

"Oh! That would be terrible!"

"Yes, it would. I'll still learn the procedures to save a woman's life if she has a miscarriage or what's called an ectopic pregnancy."

"What's that?"

"When the fetus is in the fallopian tube instead of the uterus. Both the mom and baby will die if you don't operate."

"And kill the baby?"

"The only other alternative is for both of them to die," I replied gently. "I discussed this with Father Herman and Father Nicholas, and the Church

understands such extreme situations. Sometimes doctors have to make terribly difficult decisions."

"That would be horrible. I'm not sure I could do it."

I nodded, "I agree, but as a doctor, I have to save lives, and sometimes that means doing things I don't like."

"If you had to work in Cincinnati, what would you do?"

"It would depend on my shifts, but I'd probably drive each day. It would make for long days, but then I'd be home every day, too. Would you ever want to work?"

Elizaveta shook her head, "No. Being a wife and mom is a full-time job, especially if I'm also the wife of a deacon. You would make enough to have all the nice things we wanted."

"Eventually, yes. But the bigger concern is how much time we'd spend apart, especially during my first year of Residency."

"I'm aware. And you would have obligations at church, as well."

"And that's OK?"

She smiled, "It's what I would have to do to be your wife."

"May I ask why you want that?"

"I thought you were very handsome when I first saw you, and you're sweet, gentle, and faithful. You'll be a deacon, which I think is wonderful, and you'll be a doctor, which is also wonderful. I am sure I can be a very good wife for you. I

can take care of you, the kids, and the house and help you be a good doctor and good deacon."

Given the way the conversation had gone, especially with the talk about kids, I felt I should broach the issue that I was not a virgin.

"«КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*), I need to tell you something important."

She giggled, "You're silly!"

"For calling you 'Kitten'?"

"Yes! What did you need to tell me?"

"I am not inexperienced in love," I replied gently.

"I suppose having a husband experienced in these matters is OK. You are good at it, right?"

"I'm not sure I can answer that question without being «НЕКУЛЬТУРНЫЙ» (*nekulturny*), but no matter what, if we marry, we will discover together how to be good for each other." ("inappropriate")

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Do you think I'm pretty?" Elizaveta asked.

"You're very pretty," I confirmed.

"And you want to kiss me?"

"When it's appropriate, yes."

"And when will that be?"

"I believe you should ask your mom about that!"

"And she'll tell me that I have to wait until after the wedding!"

"And do you think I'm foolish enough to do ANYTHING that would cross a «бабушка» (*babushka*)?"

"Does that include ME?"

I chuckled, "Yes, of course, but only AFTER the wedding if we do get married."

"And what will it take for you to ask me?"

"Time," I replied. "We're still getting to know each other."

"Do you think I'm too young?"

That was an interesting question, but there was only one possible answer if I wanted to continue exploring a future with Elizaveta in the timeframe under which I was operating.

"No," I replied. "But we've only spent a short amount of time together so far."

"And when would you ask?"

That was a very difficult question but a legitimate one. While I didn't have a hard deadline, sometime around the end of the year made sense. But I didn't want to commit to anything specific.

"Sometime before the wedding," I teased.

"You!" she squealed. "That's THREE kisses!"

"I promise to pay up as soon as it's appropriate and I'm permitted."



August 3, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Hi, Lara!" I called out when she jumped from her Corvette.

"Hi, Mike!"

I got up from the porch and met her halfway up the walk. We exchanged a hug and soft kiss, I scooped her into my arms, and carried her inside. I climbed the stairs and put her down when we got into the bedroom.

"Not going to throw me on the bed and ravish me?" she asked with a smile and a twinkle in her eye.

"Not yet," I replied. "And I've kept my promise to you."

"I trust you, Mike. What plans do we have?"

"The same as we discussed earlier in the week, but lunch at my grandfather's house instead of my parents'."

"Things are still bad with them?"

"Yes. I strongly suspect my grandfather invited us to lunch to try to play peacemaker."

"Shouldn't you speak to him alone?"

"He specifically asked me to bring you. If he wants to speak alone, we can do that. But I came up with another theory while I was running this morning."

"What's that?"

"He thinks you'll be able to sway me."

"Sway what? You'll never change your mind about loving Liz, so there's nothing to sway!"

"But if he has heard the story, whose side did he hear?"

"Your mom's, obviously."

"I know how to handle my grandfather," I said. "Basically the same argument I made with my dad, and before him, Sasha's dad. It'll work with my grandfather, though for the opposite reason as with Deacon Vasily -- I need to behave as a clergyman. Not to mention he has a bit of experience with rebellious daughters."

"Your mom?"

I nodded, "Yes."

"Interesting."

"In the end, that's part of my angle. But I have to wait until my mom is actually ready to talk. She isn't, just yet. The main reason I called her was because I received my scores, but also to hold out an olive branch, if you will. If it doesn't work, I'll try again at some point, probably in advance of Thanksgiving. I did tell her I'd invite them to the wedding but that I was going to invite Paul and Liz, and nothing would prevent that."

"Wait! Your scores?"

"Sorry, we got them yesterday, and I figured I'd tell you today. 75, which is the 98th percentile."

"That's excellent! Congratulations. Did Clarissa do as well?"

"Yes. 74, which is 97th percentile."

"Cool! Anyway, back to your parents; they have a choice -- come to terms with it or lose both kids?"

I nodded, "Yes. I pointed that out. My dad thinks I made the choice when I decided to support Liz, but he can't see the difference between loving her and agreeing with her."

"And all the help you gave Paul?"

"Why did I do that?" I asked. "What was my motivation?"

"Your love for your sister and your belief in repentance and rehabilitation."

"It sure as heck wasn't because I like Paul or am happy that he, as a married man and father, was sleeping with my fourteen-year-old sister!"

"Which is your REAL issue -- fidelity and duty to family, not the age gap."

"I'm torn on that one," I replied. "Had she been even two years older, I'd say it wasn't a problem, had he been single."

"It would have been legal, too."

"Yes, but that wasn't my specific concern; I think about five years is the maximum, though I have a serious concern with anyone under fifteen."

"A different arbitrary number?"

I smiled, "I talked with Doctor Mercer about that, and she pointed out that the law needs to draw bright lines so that everyone knows and understands what is and what isn't, OK. Given my experience with Sophomore girls, I'd say fifteen seems to be a point when they can decide for themselves. Granted, my experience there is basically limited to dating April and Emmy, both of whom I started dating when they were fifteen, but in both cases, I felt they could deal with the issue and decide for themselves.

"That said, I am sure there are girls who at eighteen or twenty aren't ready to have sex, just as I suspect there might be girls at fourteen who ARE ready to have sex. But honestly, if that's the case, then they should find someone who is a Sophomore or Junior, not a college graduate. To me, there's less risk of the wide gap in life experience causing trouble."

"And the idea that some girls want an older, experienced man for their first time?"

"You?" I asked.

"First of all, I'm not normal..."

"No, kidding," I interrupted.

"I'll take that as a compliment! Anyway, for me it wasn't anything to do with age, but meeting the right guy. If you had been twenty-five, I probably still would have pursued you. Older than that? Probably not. But I wasn't a typical sixteen-year-old, either. If I had met you when I was fifteen, I might or might not have done it, though I know you said you've followed the age of consent law even if you believe it might be set wrong."

"Medical licenses depend not only on following the law but on having good moral character."

"And having sex with an underage girl would disqualify you? Even if you weren't charged?"

"I have no idea, and I have absolutely no intention of finding out!"

"My stepdad would say that it ought to be up to each person and that the government should butt out of personal decisions such as that one."

"And he'd have been OK with his fourteen-year-old daughter having sex?"

"If he felt I had properly thought it through, yes. And he certainly would have believed I could think it through properly at fourteen."

"And your opinion on that style of parenting?" I asked.

"I think it worked, so I'm certainly thinking that's how I want to raise my kids -- independent and free-thinking and treated as if they were individuals, not possessions of their parents. You disagree?"

"Not with the concept, I guess, but perhaps the application yields a bit too much freedom."

"But you think I turned out OK?" Lara asked, tilting her head and smiling.

"Yes, of course, but one data point doesn't let you decide if something is appropriate or not. I know the opposite extreme is wrong -- my parents tried that with Liz, and it led to disaster. I didn't have complete freedom the way you did, but I think I had enough. The one important lesson I learned from my parents was that identical parenting styles can have VERY different effects."

"I thought you said they treated Liz differently."

"Yes and no," I replied. "The lines my parents drew were ones I generally agreed with, so I didn't see them as straitjackets; Liz did."

"Ah, OK," Lara replied, nodding. "That does make sense. I don't think we have to solve this now, do you?"

"Probably not. And even if we did come to an agreement now, circumstances will arise which we don't foresee."

"Von Moltke -- '*no plan survives contact with the enemy*'."

I laughed, "Parents versus kids?"

"I'd say your sister saw it that way, and right now, you are experiencing it."

"True. But we can figure this out later. How about we go downstairs and make dinner?"

"Sounds good. Is your professor home?"

"No. She and her boyfriend are having dinner with her daughter and son-in-law. They'll be home around 9:00pm."

"Then let's go make some food!"

XVI. Family Values

August 4, 1984, Rutherford, Ohio

"Hi!" Liz exclaimed when Lara and I walked into the restaurant in Rutherford on Saturday morning.

"Hi!" I replied, hugging her.

Paul and I shook hands with a nod, I hugged Emmy, and then the five of us sat in a round corner booth.

"Liz said you did really well on your test," Paul said.

I nodded, "I'll get into the school I want, which is all that really mattered to me. Well, I have to have an interview, but I don't foresee any problems there. Clarissa did just as well."

"You beat her by a point!" Liz declared. "Something you couldn't do with Jocelyn even after she had mono!"

I chuckled, "Don't remind me!"

"How do they pick the valedictorian at Taft?" she asked.

"A committee selects the valedictorian and salutatorian from anyone who graduates *summa cum laude*. Fortunately, a certain dean is no longer at the university. She was on that committee, so I'm sure you can imagine my chances if she were there."

The waitress came and filled our coffee cups and took our orders.

"What happened?" Lara asked when the waitress left.

"You missed the entire 'Dean Parker Saga'," I replied. "Basically a radical feminist dean who felt gender trumped grades. And anything else, for that matter. She was my absolute nemesis until she overstepped and had to resign."

"Why?"

"It's immaterial now. She's gone. If you want the whole sordid story, Melody is your best bet because she's been involved in Student Government from her first day on campus."

"The future ACLU lawyer, right?" Liz asked.

"Yes. And according to her, first female Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. She wanted to be the first female justice, but Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor, and that ended that part of the dream!"

"Did you talk with Mom?"

"Yes, but no change, really. Grandpa called me at work on Thursday and asked me to come to lunch and bring Lara."

"Why?"

I shrugged, "Who knows? Maybe Mom called him. Or, perhaps, she said something to Father Herman, and he called my grandfather. Or, as a longer shot, maybe Lara's grandfather called him."

"Mine?!" Lara asked in surprise. "Why?"

I laughed, "Is that a *serious* question?"

"Never mind! Duh!"

"Exactly. There are all sorts of forces at work here, each with its own agenda. And, before you ask, no, it doesn't bother me. I'll make my own decisions, and they can deal with it! How are things here, Liz?"

"No different from Wednesday when we talked," Liz answered. "Well, except Emmy had a date last night."

"A fireman," Emmy said. "It was our first date. I met him at Lou's earlier in the week, and he asked me out."

"Cool. When do you guys start school?"

"The day after Labor Day. You guys start a week earlier, and I guess Mindy has to be there for orientation even before that."

"The 23rd," I replied. "José is going to come back early so we can do a concert with Milena the next evening."

"That's where I first spotted Mike," Lara said. "He was singing with Milena. But Kimiko got to him first!"

The waitress brought our food, and we began eating. Paul, Liz, and Emmy all described their jobs, and Lara talked about how she had been promoted two grade levels and what it was like to be two years younger than her classmates. When we finished breakfast, Lara and I had several hours before we needed to be at my grandfather's house, so we accepted an invitation to hang out at the apartment with Liz and Emmy, while Paul went home to get some sleep.

We had a nice time hanging out with Liz and Emmy and left the apartment with enough time to fill my Mustang with gas and then drive to my grandfather's house.

"Hello, «Дедушка» (*dedushka*)! This is Larisa Sergeyevna Federova." ("Grandpa")

"«Привет, Михаил Иванович» (*Privet, Mikhail Ivanovich*)!" Lara said. ("Hello, Mikhail Ivanovich")

My grandfather laughed, "We'll have pity on Mischa and speak English. Come in!"

We followed him into the house, and he offered tea, which we accepted and my grandmother brought. I wasn't surprised when she sat down, which telegraphed the purpose of this lunch.

"Mischa, tell us what happened between you and your parents, please."

I nodded, "They don't approve of the man Liz is dating, and while I don't approve of her choice, there is little I, or anyone else, can do to change her mind. In fact, I suspect any attempts to change her mind will only harden her resolve. I told Mom and Dad that I was going to love and support Liz, no matter what, even if I didn't approve of her choices."

"This man has some kind of criminal record?"

"He does. He works the night shift at the motel which Yuri Valentinovich owns."

My grandfather's eyebrow raised, "If you call him by that name, then I suspect you had something to do with this Paul getting the job?"

I nodded, "I did."

"And this man's crime?"

"Consensual sex with an underage girl," I replied.

My grandfather laughed. "No wonder Yuri Valentinovich had no problems hiring him!"

"That old goat thinks he's twenty!" my grandmother said, shaking her head. "But his wife keeps him in line!"

"Like every good «бабушка» (*babushka*)!" I said with a grin. "We all know who is *really* in charge!"

"Mischa, we do," my grandfather said, "but we don't ever admit it to them!"

"Oops," I replied, then laughed softly.

"He's a wise boy, my grandson," my grandmother replied.

"And our granddaughter seems to be just as headstrong and rebellious as our daughter was at this age!" my grandfather said.

"And I wonder where she gets this from, hmm?" my grandmother asked.

"Yes, yes," my grandfather acknowledged. "Mischa, do you think this man is a danger to Elizabeth?"

"No," I replied. "And because I believe in repentance and forgiveness and that anyone can be saved, I have no choice but to help him, purely out of Christian love, if nothing else. And to help Liz as well. For me to do what my parents

want, and reprimand Liz and refuse to have anything to do with her, would belie the Gospel, and it would be contrary to the service to which I am called."

My grandfather nodded, "I assume you said this to your parents?"

"I did. It's similar to what I said to Deacon Vasily. I believe he told you about that."

"He did. You were very wise, Mischa. A bit out of line, but called for, I think. These kinds of things happen with young people, and God forgives. Sasha married, appropriately, and faithfully attends church. Because God forgives, we must as well."

"Exactly," I replied. "And that's where I think, in the end, Mom will relent. It will just take some time. Do you think I've made a mistake?"

My grandfather laughed, "I'm sure of it because none of us are perfect, including my friend who managed to get himself burdened with a crown and staff! But I think you did the best you could, given the circumstances."

"You know if you tell Mom that, she's going to be just as angry with you as she is with me, and Dad will be even angrier."

"As if THAT hasn't happened before!" my grandmother said with a wry smile, "Rachel and her father did not see eye-to-eye when she was in High School or when she went to college. And, to tell the truth, we didn't approve of Peter when she met him, either. But he loved her and agreed to be chrismated, so we kept our mouths shut from that point."

"Does she know?" I asked.

"That we didn't approve? Yes. But as you've done with Liz, once we told her, we knew that anything we did would simply drive her to do the opposite of what we wanted. Your uncle was more like you, though, as you know, he had no interest in the clerical ranks. But he and his father got along very, very well, just as you did with your mother."

"And you?"

"Your mother and I were fairly close, and as Mikhail knows, I mediated between him and Rachel."

"Was she that bad?" I asked.

My grandfather smiled wryly, "She had modern sensibilities but managed to avoid getting into trouble."

I couldn't help but laugh. My grandfather knew, or at least strongly suspected, what my mom had been doing and had just admitted as much to me. And while I found it funny, it also bothered me from the standpoint that my mom was following my dad's lead, not what her parents had modeled for her. That was an interesting revelation in and of itself and was something I'd need to take into account in my own marriage.

"So what do you suggest, «Дедушка» (*dedushka*)?"

"«Исподволь и ольху согнёшь» (*Ispodvol i olkhu sognosh*)," he replied. ("be patient"; lit. "You can bend an alder tree, if you do it gradually")

I nodded because patience was, indeed, the correct strategy, and was the one I was following.

"I'll keep reaching out occasionally," I said.

"Good. Now, Larisa Sergeyevna, how is your grandfather? I haven't spoken to him in at least ten years."

"He's doing well and said to say 'hello', should I meet you."

"What? He can't pick up the telephone?"

Lara smirked, "I believe you have one as well, Mikhail Ivanovich!"

"So I do! So I do! Mischa, this girl is already on the path!"

"It's in the crism, «Дедушка» (*dedushka*)!" I replied.

"Indeed! What are you studying, Larisa?"

"Mathematics with the plan to teach High School."

"Good. A very appropriate job for a Matushka which does not interfere with grandchildren!"

"Assuming I choose to marry Mike, yes."

It was my grandmother's turn to laugh now.

"You were saying about who is in charge, Mischa?" she asked my grandfather with a twinkle in her eye.

"Trust me! I know!" my grandfather said with a wry smile.

"Let me get lunch on the table, please," my grandmother said. "Come to the table in five minutes."

"I'll help you," Lara said.

She got up and followed my grandmother to the kitchen.

"Well?" he asked quietly.

"Things are going fine," I replied. "I'm also seeing Elizaveta Viktorovna Kozlov."

"I don't think they allow a Deacon two wives, Mischa!" he teased.

If they did, I might actually be able to work something out with Clarissa, but alas, my grandfather was exactly right.

"No, of course not! It's really a question of whether or not Larisa Sergeyevna is willing to put up with fulfilling the role of Matushka. If she is, then I think things will go the way you suggested earlier."

"You think that's truly a concern for her?"

I nodded, "It was for Natalya Vasilyevna. From the beginning, she made that point about being a deacon's wife. She wasn't thrilled by the microscope under which her mom had to live. Tasha was under that microscope as well, though it wasn't quite as harshly focused."

"So that was her real issue?"

"That plus she would have felt neglected while I was studying and working, and she wanted a family immediately, something to which I could devote very little time until after Residency. She couldn't accept the conditions, so to speak."

"I have to say it was surprising to many of us, but what you say makes sense. Being the wife of a clergyman is no easy task, and you will be training to be a doctor as well."

"Shall we go eat?" I asked.

"Yes!"

We went to join my grandmother and Lara and had a very nice lunch of Moscow borscht and black bread. As with anything my grandmother cooked, it was awesome, and the homemade black bread was out of this world, as usual. I could fill myself with bread and creamy butter and not have a single regret. When we finished, we thanked my grandparents for their hospitality, then headed back to McKinley so we could attend Vespers.



August 5, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

When Lara and I left the church, we headed back into town, where we'd go to Tasha's apartment to join Jocelyn, Clarissa, and Tasha for the afternoon. I'd survived both the Saturday night and Sunday morning services without any kind of incident between Lara and Elizaveta, but the looks Elizaveta's friends had given Lara were brutal. One weekend was OK, but once school started, the 'open warfare' that Clarissa had suggested might come to pass, though, with Elizaveta's friends acting as her proxies, even if she didn't encourage them to do so. I wasn't the only one who noticed, either.

"The junior «бабушки» (*babushki*) had the long knives out for me," Lara said as I pulled out of the church parking lot.

"I noticed," I replied. "But Elizaveta was very polite, as were you."

"Pistols at ten paces?" Lara teased.

"Except Oksana and Serafima would bring machine guns!" I chuckled.

"They're just trying to protect their friend's interest. And given you wear a cassock at church, you can't really display any affection to anyone."

"That does have its advantages because it allows me to remain neutral, at least outwardly."

"ARE you neutral?"

"Do you realize just how dangerous that question is when I'm still getting to know both of you? And trying to balance the fact that she's here full-time and you won't be for another few weeks?"

"And if I told you today, I was ready to make a commitment?"

"ARE you ready to do that?"

"Humor me."

"That's not fair, Larisa. I'm not saying it's an inappropriate question, but don't you think that answer commits me?"

Lara smiled, "The fact that you're answering that way tells me how you're feeling. You're sufficiently sure we're compatible that if I tell you today that I'm ready to make the lifetime commitment, you'll do it."

"That's not inaccurate," I replied. "But I also know you have some qualms about what amounts to, at least for you, enforced social conservatism."

"You've pretty much hit the nail on the head."

"And unlike any normal marriage, the room for negotiation is fairly limited."

"Trust me, I'm well aware," she replied. "It's one of the points my stepdad raised. Not in a 'trying to talk me out of it' way, but just making sure I went into this with my eyes wide open."

"And?"

"And I can't give you an answer just yet, but I think that's actually best because, as you say, you need time to get to know me better. And I agree with that. We're still on the same page. Mike. Baby steps, if you will. At least while there's still lots of time left on the clock."

I chuckled, "I'm not sure anyone else on the planet would call ten months 'lots of time!'"

"But it is, really, if you think about it logically. Either we decide to do this, or we don't, and I honestly don't feel that thinking about it for two or three years changes anything. It's a commitment, and once you give your word, you move forward and solve each problem as it arises."

"You haven't told me what happened with your parents," I said.

"My mom cheated with my stepdad. I take it that explains quite a bit?"

I nodded, "It does, especially why she might leave the church. Was your dad completely innocent in the matter?"

"As far as I'm aware, yes. He was granted a non-penitential second marriage."

"That's basically the bishop declaring your dad was a completely innocent party."

"That's what my grandfather said."

"Was your stepdad single at the time?"

"Yes. His marriage to my mom was his first. He's a good guy, generally. I guess he had a weakness for pretty Russian women. Or at least one specific pretty Russian woman."

"She initiated it?"

"Evidence certainly points that way."

"I never asked, what kind of law do they practice?"

"Mom does corporate law, which is how she met my stepdad. My biological dad is a tax attorney; my step-mom is bottom-feeding scum."

I chuckled, "What Jocelyn calls a plaintiff's attorney?"

"An ambulance chaser. Very lucrative, but the kinds of settlements she extracts are outrageous. Guess who her favorite targets are?"

"Doctors," I replied.

"Right the first time. Don't get me wrong, she's a sweetheart and I love her, but what she does for a living? No thanks. What does Jocelyn want to do?"

"Litigation. She'd like to be a federal judge at some point."

"Can I ask you about that conversation with your grandfather?"

I chuckled, "I was wondering when you'd ask. Mom was a 'wild child' and it appears my grandfather knew she was running around with a boy."

"Running around'? What is this, *Leave it to Beaver*?"

"We're talking my mom here," I chuckled. "I'll use whatever euphemisms limit the amount of brain bleach I'm going to need!"

"You do realize how you came into the world, right?"

"Yes, of course! I'm not denying it happened; I just don't need to think about it! And yes, I know it still happens. But I also don't need to think about THAT either!"

"You didn't know your grandparents didn't approve of your dad?"

"No, but in hindsight, it doesn't surprise me. And that disapproval was likely related to my own problems with my dad. He has this Calvinist mindset where the world is divided into the saved and the reprobate."

"Which is why he thinks Paul isn't redeemable?"

"Yes, but I do have to grant him the point that, from his perspective, as well as that of the State of Ohio, Paul actually did rape Liz. I don't think so, and you and I discussed my unease with the whole thing."

"More about infidelity than anything, which is what your problem would be with my stepdad."

"Don't you mean your mom? She broke her vows. Sure, your stepdad broke the social compact, but it was your mom who broke her vows."

"Very enlightened!"

"Logical," I replied. "He didn't break any promise; he violated social customs. Your mom is the one who broke her promise. That doesn't make it less sinful on either of their parts, but to me, violating your vows is a direct attack on your own soul."

"As a clergyman, what would you do about a cheater?"

"That's a priest's job, not a deacon's, thank God!"

"Hypothetically?"

"As with any sin, it depends on repentance. And you have to take their family situation into consideration as to what the appropriate response would be. The same is true of the person who was cheated on. Reconciliation would be ideal, but I know I'd personally have a very hard time reconciling to a spouse who cheated."

"Same. I think my dad was right to simply divorce my mom."

"Why did you end up with her?"

"In 1972, no judge would have given custody to my dad because I was five and a girl. Even now, in supposedly more enlightened times, little kids almost always go with their moms unless she's unfit for some reason. He didn't try to make that case in Family Court. He could have, because in 1972 adultery would have been what you call 'moral turpitude' when you're talking about your medical license."

But he didn't want the bad press and didn't want the situation to cost either of them their law licenses, which have the same basic provision."

"That makes sense. Do you get along with your half-siblings?"

"Sure. I see my dad fairly often, and they've always been cool. And as I said, I get along with my step-mom despite her chosen profession!"

"Do you think I'm handling things correctly with Liz?"

"I don't see how you could do anything else. You made it clear to Liz you don't approve, but you also made it clear you love her. I actually think Paul seems like a really nice guy, and unless we delve into his first marriage, we can't know for sure why he did what he did. Have you asked him?"

"No. I didn't figure that was any of my business. Liz knows more, but that's her business. Since he was released from prison, Paul has been an upstanding citizen, done his job, treated Liz right, and complied with all the conditions of parole."

We arrived at campus, parked, and walked towards the apartment.

"When do you plan to come back to school?" I asked.

"On the 23rd, so I can come to the concert on Friday evening, assuming I can hang out at Doctor Blahnik's house,"

"To ensure no cute little Freshman tries to make off with me?"

"I want to hear you sing!"

"I'll speak to Doctor Blahnik. Just so you know, next weekend, I'm taking Clarissa to see her parents and hopefully heal that rift."

"I hope that goes well."

"Me, too!"

We had a fun time at Tasha's, and around 8:00pm, I walked Lara back to Doctor Blahnik's house so she could head back to Pittsburgh. We exchanged a hug and a soft kiss, and after she drove off, I headed back to the dorm.



August 9, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I'm sorry my friends behaved the way they did," Elizaveta said as we sat in the backyard after another wonderful dinner and time with her dad where I finessed the question of dinner with my parents by saying I was extremely busy until after school started.

"They're just looking out for you, that's all," I said. "Lara wasn't upset."

"And I'm not upset, either. I know you met Lara before I spoke to you. And you were truthful. And I'm confident in my situation."

"May I ask why?"

"Because you're here. If you weren't very, very interested in me, you wouldn't put up with my parents' restrictions, wouldn't play golf with my dad, and so on."

"An astute observation," I replied. "I do want to raise something I think is important."

"What?" she asked nervously.

"Male and female roles," I replied. "I don't think there is such a thing as work that is just for men or just for women. Take cleaning up the kitchen after the meal -- I'd like to help, but it seems forbidden in your house."

"First of all, you are the guest, so you have no business doing chores. And second, as I said, when will Deacon and Doctor Michael have time for such things?"

"It's the principle of the thing. I can wash dishes, do laundry, clean, and even cook a little bit. And I'll change diapers and bathe babies, too, when it's time, though I suspect you'll need to teach me how."

"You don't think doing those things is the wife's job?"

"I think it depends on the family situation. Perhaps it's her primary responsibility, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't help."

"And if she wants to do these things for you?"

"I'm not saying you can't or shouldn't, simply that I don't believe there are any strong rules in that regard. I suppose in that way, you could say I'm not traditional. I'll give you an example -- if we were to marry after you turn sixteen, you would be in school, and I would be in school. When we both came home, we'd share the chores -- cooking, cleaning, laundry, and dishes. In the future, as things change, that might change, but I don't want a servant; I want a wife who is an equal partner!"

"You don't want me?" she asked, sounding sad.

"«Котёнок» (*katyonak*), that's not what I'm saying at all. It's just that I want my family to be more like mine at home and less like your dad's or Deacon Vasily's. Is that really such a problem?" ("Kitten")

"It's just not what I've been taught marriage is supposed to be like."

"Shouldn't that be a decision between the spouses?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"How about we agree that I'm permitted to help you when I have time?"

"Between studying, working, and practicing for making babies? When will you have time?" she asked with a silly smile.

"I think we can manage to find the time," I chuckled. "Or do you think practicing making babies is all we'll do?"

"I understand it takes lots and lots of practice to get it right!"

"Perhaps you'll be an expert, and we won't need to practice."

"You're teasing again! It's four kisses now, Mischa!"



August 11, 1984, Sylvania, Ohio

Clarissa and I had left for Sylvania immediately after we both finished work the previous afternoon. We'd arrived just before 9:00pm and checked into the motel. She'd considered her options and decided it was better to not have to worry about a confrontation late on a Friday evening when we might have trouble

getting a motel, or we might have to pay for a room we didn't use. We'd slept snuggled close together in the queen-size bed, something we both very much enjoyed.

"Ready?" I asked as we walked up to the door of her house.

"Does it matter? We're here!"

"True, but we could turn around and run away."

"Vegas and get married?"

"If that's a real offer, let's go to the nearest airport! Toledo, right?"

"Tempting, but..."

"I know."

Clarissa rang the bell, and her mom opened the door.

"You didn't have to ring the bell, Clarissa!" her mom said. "Hi, Mike."

"Hi, Mrs. Saunders," I replied.

"I felt I should, after last time," Clarissa replied to her mom.

"Well, don't just stand there, come on in!"

Given how civil she was being, I felt fairly confident that things would be far better than the last time I'd been in the house when I'd been told in no uncertain terms not to return. She led us to the kitchen, where we sat down at the table. Mrs. Saunders poured coffee for us, then put platters of bacon, eggs, and

pancakes on the table. She bade us eat, and we served ourselves and began eating.

"Where's dad?" Clarissa asked.

"Out," her mom said flatly.

That didn't bode well, and it appeared there was some kind of rift between Clarissa's parents about seeing her.

"He couldn't stand to see me?" she asked.

"He's not dealing well with this. I'm not either, but I needed to see you. I don't understand what happened to you, but I miss you."

"Nothing happened, Mom. I was born this way."

"Are you sure? Maybe it's just, I don't know, confusion?"

Clarissa looked at me, asking a question with her eyes, and I nodded my assent.

"Mom, Mike and I have made love."

Mrs. Saunders gasped and covered her mouth.

Clarissa continued, "I am positive I'm a lesbian. I want to be with girls. I want to make love with girls. I want to spend my life with a girl."

"But if you could with Mike..." her mom said, recovering from the shock.

"We've tried really hard," Clarissa said. "We've slept in the same bed many nights, and we've experimented with sex, but it's just not the same for me as

making love with a girl. I'm sure, Mom. Mike would marry me in a heartbeat if I were straight, and if I were straight, I'd marry him. I **WANT** to marry him, but I can't because I'm a lesbian."

"Mrs. Saunders," I said, "if I may -- Clarissa and I have talked about this for the past year, and as much as I wish it were otherwise, this is who she is. I love her, and I'll love her for the rest of our lives. I want her to be happy, and what makes her happy is her girlfriend. She has a new one, by the way, a very sweet girl who's a nurse at Moore Memorial Hospital in McKinley. I think you'll like her."

"This is all so confusing for me!"

"Does that change how much you love your daughter?" I asked.

"No. You two really tried to be a couple?"

I nodded, "We did. We've spent a lot of time together, done those things which Clarissa mentioned before, but in the end, she wants to be with a girl. This isn't a decision on her part; it's just who she is. You took the first step, Mrs. Saunders; don't give up now, please."

"But my husband..."

"Will have to come to terms with it for himself," I replied. "In the end, love seems to triumph if it's allowed to."

"Mom, I'm still the same person I was when I lived here. I knew at thirteen what I wanted."

"I know, honey, but it's just difficult for me."

There was a bit of silence, so I simply resumed eating. There really wasn't anything more to say, and whatever happened next was up to Mrs. Saunders. It seemed as if she was going to have her work cut out for her with her husband, but I felt we'd made some progress. When we finished eating, Clarissa and I pitched in to help clean up, and then the three of us sat down with coffee.

"We received our MCAT scores," Clarissa said. "I scored in the 97% percentile, which means only two percent of students in the whole country did better. One of those is Mike, who beat me by one point."

"That's very good, honey! Are you still planning to go to McKinley Medical School?"

"Yes. Mike and Sandy are going there as well, assuming we all pass our interviews."

"We'll continue to send you the same amount of money," Mrs. Saunders said.

"Thanks, Mom. I appreciate it. And I really appreciate you allowing me to come home."

"Mike," Mrs. Saunders said, "would you mind taking a walk so I can speak privately with Clarissa?"

"Lissa?" I inquired.

"Go ahead, Petrovich."

I refilled my coffee cup, which I took with me when I got up and left the kitchen. I went out the front door and turned right so I could walk around the block. As I walked, I thought about my parents and hoped that my mom would come to her senses soon. I was sure my grandfather had spoken to her, but he wouldn't do

anything other than gently nudge her. My grandmother, on the other hand, might resort to a rolling pin!

As I walked, I thought about the past three years and realized that there had been only short periods of total calm. Much of the drama, if I wanted to call it that, had revolved around Liz and Jocelyn, with Dean Parker providing additional aggravation. My relationship issues, with one or two exceptions, hadn't really created problems, per se, but opportunities for growth. And if there was one thing I could say about the three years since High School graduation, it was that I had grown.

As I made my second circuit, I realized that despite the fears I'd had when I'd left home, everything was coming together, albeit not in the way I'd envisioned when I'd walked across the stage at Harding High. I'd arrived at the place I wanted to be, but the path had been very different from what I'd imagined. I was very happy, and if I could fix the relationship with my parents and between my parents and Liz, all would be right with the world.

I returned to the house after twice around the block, and found Clarissa and her mom in the living room.

"Can you stay for lunch, Mike?" Mrs. Saunders asked.

I nodded, "Yes, if Clarissa wants to. We have to leave by about 2:00pm to be back in time for Vespers, so lunch is fine."

"I do," Clarissa said. "Everything is OK, Mike. I just answered some questions for my mom."

"Refill your coffee and join us, Mike," Mrs. Saunders said.

I went to the kitchen, where I refilled my coffee cup, then rejoined Clarissa and her mom. The three of us talked, and in the process, Clarissa caught her mom up on the past year. After that, the conversation turned to me and my relationship with Clarissa. By lunchtime, I was convinced that Clarissa's mom was completely onside. The question was her dad, but he hadn't shown up.

When we finished lunch, Clarissa and I said 'goodbye', then left the house, got into my car, and headed for McKinley.

"That seemed to go very well in the end," I said.

"She's missed me terribly," Clarissa replied. "And in the end, that overcame her objections to my sexuality, at least enough to restore our relationship."

"And your dad?"

"While you were out, she told me he planned to stay away from the house the entire day."

"So I take it the checks and cards come from your mom alone?"

"Yes, though she signs the cards 'Mom & Dad'. She didn't say so, but I'm guessing they had a fight about me visiting."

"That wouldn't surprise me. My dad has serious concerns about homosexuality, which you and I discussed some time ago. It was touch and go with you being at the house at first. He basically agreed to keep quiet on the topic."

"She also asked me about sex," Clarissa said, giggling a bit, which was exceedingly rare for her.

"Which kinds?"

"Both. Her curiosity got the best of her in that regard."

"You gave your mom explicit details about your sex life?" I asked, surprised.

"Without being vulgar, yes. What she was really interested in was what I meant about you not being able to satisfy very specific needs. I also discovered something VERY interesting."

"Oh?"

"Mom has trouble with orgasms from regular intercourse."

I chuckled, "And she thinks playing for the other team might help?"

Clarissa laughed, "I'm not sure I'd go THAT far, but I have to say I was shocked when she asked ME for advice!"

"And what did you tell her?"

"To tell my dad what she needs and how she needs it! They don't discuss it; they just do it. And she appears to be more than a bit frustrated."

"I'm expecting Rod Serling any minute now!"

"Ditto! I swear, all I could hear in my head was the theme song to *The Twilight Zone*!"

"Did you give your mom tips?" I teased.

"No!" Clarissa stated emphatically. "I told her to tell my dad what she wants, explicitly."

"I think Jocelyn knew that would happen with me if she didn't take the lead and give me very clear instructions."

"As we said, she taught you very well!"

"Will you go home for Thanksgiving and Christmas?"

"I think that depends on you and how things go with Abby. What will you do if you haven't reconciled with your parents?"

"Right now, there are too many variables," I replied. "First, I need to meet Lara's parents."

"All I can say is the next six months are going to be interesting."

"That's one way to put it," I grinned. "But with your help, I'm sure everything will turn out right."

"Thanks, Petrovich. I love you."

"I love you, too, Lissa."



August 13, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Are you going to play that album every evening for the rest of your life?" Jocelyn asked as I put *Purple Rain*, by Prince and The Revolution, onto the turntable.

"Tell me one even mediocre song on this album! I dare you!"

"OK, but still! Three weeks straight?"

"He's just enamored with the fact that 'Doctor Fink' of The Revolution dresses in scrubs!" Clarissa teased.

"And this Friday, we're going to see the movie, too?" Dona asked.

"Supposedly, Prince's performance in the movie is so good that it makes up for what the critics are calling an 'uneven' plot. But the music will be out of this world, I'm sure."

"What's your favorite song?" Jocelyn asked.

"It's hard to choose, but I'd have to say *Let's Go Crazy* edges out *When Doves Cry* by a hair."

"Not *Darling Nikki*?" she teased.

"I don't think I've ever met a girl in a hotel lobby masturbating to a magazine," I chuckled.

"Not to be difficult, but what do you think Tasha's boyfriend Nikolas would think of this album?"

"He'd be about as happy with it as he would be my George Carlin tapes or *Joe's Garage* by Zappa. That's why I'll keep those albums separate. Did Tasha ever tell you about her dad's records?"

"No."

"He keeps classical music on the shelf next to the turntable. His Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, and Bob Dylan albums are locked away in the stereo cabinet."

Clarissa and Jocelyn both laughed.

"And you're OK with that?" Dona asked.

"It's about not giving offense," I replied. "Nobody is saying I can't listen to what I want to listen to in private. Think about how some people deal with swearing -- they'll swear at home or when they're alone with their friends, but never in front of their grandmother, for example. Is that phony? Or just being polite?"

"Polite, obviously."

"That's the point with the music. And it really applies to just about anything else in life -- there are some things we do because they are social conventions and create a polite society. We're not as rigid as, say, Japan, but you do need some basic rules governing social interaction, otherwise you end up with anarchy."

"What about 'Free Speech'?" Jocelyn asked. "People say lots of offensive things."

I nodded, "They do. But it's not up to the government to decide what is and what isn't OK to say. The solution for offensive speech is either countering it with good speech or simply ignoring the person. Walk away and don't associate with them. The same as you would do with someone who was constantly foul-mouthed or abusive."

"Like the preacher on Campus on Saturdays?" Clarissa asked.

"Him, I simply avoid," I replied. "I have far better things to do with the limited time I have."

"Did you decide to drop karate?"

"I think so, but I want to talk to Robby and Lee when they come back. I don't want them to feel like I'm abandoning them."

"Sorry to change the subject," Jocelyn said, "but is anyone interested in ice cream?"

The vote was unanimous, and we left the dorm for Verner's.

XVII. Strengths and Weaknesses

August 21, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"When's your last day?" Grace asked on Tuesday morning.

"Tomorrow. I need to participate in checking in Freshmen starting Thursday. Are you working Thursday and Friday?"

"Thursday, because it's check-in. Friday, I'll be at orientation. Do you think we could keep our chess dates?"

"Evenings are out because of studying, but Tuesday and Thursday afternoons are completely free, except for my guitar lesson on Thursday right after lunch."

"What about Tuesday afternoons?"

"That sounds good."

"I will beat you, eventually!"

I chuckled, "You've been saying that all Summer! But you are getting better."

"The problem is, you started off so much better and once you stopped being rusty, that made it even MORE difficult!"

"True, but we've had some draws, and I'd say that's a good sign."

"You'd think persistence would be worth *some* kind of reward!"

"If I hadn't made a promise to someone, I'd be more than happy to offer that. Now, I need to open the doors for business!"

"And I need to get to work!" Grace replied.

The morning was relatively busy because of deliveries, but there were some lulls during the afternoon. When work finished, I went back to campus to get my car, then drove to Grace's house for dinner and chess. She was, indeed, getting better, and I had to really focus and concentrate, but I won my game as white and drew both games as black.

"I never asked," she said as we picked up the pieces after the third game, "but how strictly are the rules enforced in the dorms?"

"The rules against drugs are extremely strict. Even the report of the smell of pot will have your room searched. For booze, generally, if you keep it in your room and have the door shut, nobody will bother you. You do run the risk of someone reporting you, though. Mostly, I haven't seen that happen, and the female RA we'll have on Rickenbacker 8 is pretty cool. Fundamentally, keep it out of sight, and you won't have a problem."

"And the rules for co-ed floors?"

"Rickenbacker 8 is certain to vote for no curfew; I can't say for sure for other floors or other dorms. Mostly Rickenbacker 8 is self-selected nerds who know how to have fun while being serious students. Occasionally, we get some idiots like the Freshmen last year who decided doing whippets during sex was a great idea, at least until the girl passed out."

"What happened?"

"They were kicked out of the dorms. Nitrous oxide isn't illegal in those whipped cream canister refills, but it is against the rules. With pot, if it's just a couple of joints, the cops will write you a citation because Ohio decriminalized marijuana, but the school will kick you out of the dorms."

"And sex?"

I chuckled, "We're in college; what do YOU think?"

She laughed, "Impossible to stop."

"Exactly. You can have overnight guests, but if they aren't students, they can't stay more than two consecutive nights or more than three during a seven-day period. And even then, if it becomes TOO persistent, they could, in theory, charge you extra. I've never seen that, but the rules have only been in place for a short time. If it's two students? Well, Fran and Jason have basically lived together for two years, minus a short period when a student on 7 decided to invite a fourteen-year-old girl to his room for sex."

"What happened?"

"Expelled; but because he was eighteen, the State let him plead to 'contributing to the delinquency of a minor'. Not ideal for him, but better than a statutory rape conviction."

"As if the government should have ANY say about who I fuck or when I fuck."

"I had this discussion recently, and while I agree in principle, there are some limits. I don't know the exact right age, but fourteen is probably below it, especially when the guy is eighteen or nineteen."

"I can see your point, I guess. I just don't like the idea that some old fart in Columbus or Washington, DC, can tell me what I can do with my own body."

"And even there, I think there have to be some limits. I think there's a world of difference between, say, motorcycle helmet laws and laws against selling or using cocaine, even though both are pretty dumb and put your life at serious risk!"

"True. I guess I'll see you tomorrow at work, then at school."

"It'll be hard to miss me," I chuckled.

We hugged, I left her house, and headed back to campus.



August 23, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"What's bugging you, Mike?" Clarissa asked when we returned to my room on Thursday afternoon after helping check in new Freshmen.

"I was just thinking about how to address a concern with Elizaveta tonight."

"What's that?"

"Elizaveta's innate conservatism makes me question if she's really mature enough to make the decision she might need to make in a few months."

"Isn't that kind of the opposite issue from Lara -- her natural liberalism calls into question whether she can actually accept the restrictions she'll have to live under as a deacon's wife."

I nodded, "I think I can sum this up succinctly -- Elizaveta will make a perfect wife for a deacon; Lara will make a perfect wife for a doctor."

"And Angie would have managed both," Clarissa added.

"Now you see why, despite the impossibility of that situation, I keep thinking of her."

"Not to mention you fell in love with her and are still in love with her."

"Which, sadly, doesn't much matter at this point. I can tell, from my weekly talks with her, that she's basically back to where she was just prior to her first public meltdown. That's not a good place, in the sense of having a relationship, but THAT particular persona was earning good grades, had friends, and more or less functioned quite well."

"You're blaming yourself, aren't you?"

I shook my head, "No, just recognizing that I'm her trigger. But the problem is, I'm also her support. It's a bizarre situation, and I think Doctor Mercer is a bit more concerned about how Angie will react to me getting engaged than she's letting on. I know she's trying to build a good support system for Angie, but I feel like I'll be pulling the rug out from under her. I'm not really sure what to do, and I'm not sure Doctor Mercer knows, either."

"Because the very thing that's helping Angie recover is the very thing that's going to cause her next meltdown."

"Pretty much. And think about Tasha's concerns about what my life will be like for the next six years or so. Could I, if by some miracle Angie got to a point where she could have a relationship, give her enough attention? I doubt it, and

that would be a nightmare of epic proportions. But we're off on a rabbit trail now."

"Are we? I think, in a sense, Angie is the model for your wife. She should have been. And yes, I know the whole argument that without her condition, she'd be a very different person, but we could say that about everyone, including me. I suppose the question you have to ask yourself is which one will be more successful in adapting to her own 'weakness', if you will?"

"It's a bit deeper than that," I replied. "Lara is basically a mature adult at seventeen. Elizaveta, except when she first approached me, seems like a kid."

"All your interactions are completely supervised, right?"

"The KGB has nothing on her mom and grandmother," I chuckled. "They're just barely out of earshot, but it wouldn't surprise me if the bench in the backyard was bugged!"

Clarissa laughed, "Nice, but you don't really believe that, do you?"

"No. The parallel I want to draw is to Tasha. How she behaved under direct supervision versus how she behaved when we were alone, even if it was just in my car on the way to the diner or taking a walk afterwards. I think the problem is 'courting', really. I need to get Elizaveta out of that environment into one where she can show her true personality. I saw a glimpse of it at church that day."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I'll try the same thing with her father that I did with Deacon Vasily -- ask to take Elizaveta out for ice cream."

"And if he says 'no'?"

"Then I don't think my relationship with her is going anywhere," I replied.

"And Lara? The opposite concern?"

"That one has been bugging me since the Fourth of July. Lara is not prim, proper, or demure."

"But she's your intellectual equal."

I chuckled, "She claims to be smarter than I am, which, I'll concede, is possible."

"Don't let that single point on the MCAT go to your head, Petrovich!"

"I won't! Anyway, the point is, how necessary is that? In other words, I'll get all kinds of intellectual stimulation outside the house."

"And sexual stimulation inside it?" Clarissa teased.

"You jest, but the question is, what exactly do I need at home?"

"An interesting point," Clarissa replied. "Until just this second, I would have said Lara, but now that I think about it, the LAST thing you're going to want in your 'downtime' is a conversation about medicine or about the chemical weapons ban that Reagan proposed earlier in the year."

"You know I avoid political discussions like the plague, and I basically tune out when those take over at meals. And you just identified another thing. When Lara comes home from a day of teaching High Schoolers, if she's looking for intellectual stimulation rather than the other kind, will I be in any state to provide it?"

"Interesting. You just identified potential long-term problems with each girl. And not to beat a dead horse, those are ones you wouldn't have with an Angie who could have a physically intimate relationship."

"Tell me something I haven't known for YEARS, Lissa," I said with a deep sigh.
"You remember what I told her?"

"The whole chastity until marriage thing. You were willing to do that for her way back during Freshman year."

"And this conversation has made me realize something else about you and me."

"What's that?"

"Could YOU live under the scrutiny that falls on a deacon's wife? And be happy?"

"That's a hell of a question, and one I have to say I'm happy to not have to struggle with. You seem to be OK with it."

"It's the environment in which I grew up."

"As has Elizaveta."

"Yes, of course. Both girls have strengths and weaknesses, just as I do. And now I need to get to dinner and ask my question of Mr. Kozlov."

"Good luck!"

Clarissa and I hugged and left my room. She headed down the hall to see Jocelyn while I left the dorm to head to the Kozlovs' for dinner. As always, the food was excellent, and as always, I joined Mr. Kozlov in his study for a splash of brandy.

"I'd like to take Elizaveta for ice cream after church on Sunday," I said. "We'd go straight to Verner's, and I'd bring her straight home from there. No more than an hour."

Mr. Kozlov nodded, "I think that would be acceptable. This Sunday?"

"Yes. Now that you've given your blessing, I'll ask her when she finishes in the kitchen."

"Good. School starts on Monday, right?"

"Yes," I replied.

"When are you able to play golf?"

"It would have to be either Tuesdays or Thursdays in the afternoon. And I guess we only have a few more months of nice weather."

"Mid-October is when it starts to be too cold and windy, though there are sometimes nice days. I can arrange my schedule to have Thursday afternoon free. Would you be able to be at the club at 2:30pm? We could play a round and then have dinner."

"So long as I'm back on campus by 7:00pm for my study group, that would work."

"The course isn't too busy on Thursday afternoons, so we should be able to make that work. Worst case, we'll just play nine holes. I'll make sure everything is arranged. Did you get your shoes on Monday?"

"Yes. Thank you for the gift."

"You're welcome. If we play golf on Thursday and have dinner at the club, we'll need to change the day for dinner here. Your schedule seems very full, so what would you say to a meal on Saturday at noon?"

"That would probably work."

"Good."

Elizaveta came to the door, and we went out to our usual spot in the backyard.

"On Sunday, I'd like to take you to Verner's for ice cream."

"Did you ask my dad?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Then yes, I'd like that!"

"Good. We'll leave right from church, and I promised your dad to bring you right home."

"OK."

"You know, I never asked you, but are you a good student?"

"Nearly all A's. I have trouble with Spanish, but otherwise, I'm a very good student."

"And your favorite subjects?"

"History and science. I really liked biology. But that's the last science class for non-college-bound students."

"You've never thought about going to college?"

"Not really, but I'll only be a Sophomore when we start school next week. I've wanted to be a wife and mom since I was little."

"Because your grandmother and your mom told you that?"

Elizaveta laughed, "No. It is what my mom did because my dad made enough money to support them, but my grandmother worked once the kids were in school. She had training as what we now call a dental hygienist before she met my grandfather, so that's what she did."

"And on your dad's side?" I asked.

"My grandfather ran a dress-making shop, and my grandmother worked with him. Did you think someone told me I had to be a wife and mom?"

"I did wonder, given the way your dad has handled things."

"Didn't he tell you he spoils me and gives me what I want?"

I chuckled, "He did, but also said he was in potential trouble because he couldn't give me to you!"

"I went to him, Mishka; he didn't tell me to do this. He'd let me do whatever I wanted with my life. This is what I want."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. I love kids, and I've babysat for most of the younger kids at church. I enjoy doing things around the house. Nobody makes me do them. I like to cook, bake, and sew. Those things are fun! I like to go to church, and I follow the teachings as faithfully as possible because I believe and because I want to."

"What's your favorite part of history?"

"Russian history, but we don't study it very much in school. Otherwise, I like American history, especially the time around the American Revolution. Sometimes I think it would be cool to live in the days of Washington."

"Medicine involved leeches and bleeding 'bad humors' from people!" I chuckled.

"And no electricity, which I think is a bigger problem! But if you could live in the past, when would you want to live?"

"Probably around the 4th century in Constantinople," I replied. "Or maybe in Saint Petersburg during the 18th or 19th century."

"Perhaps someone will invent a time machine, like in the story by H. G. Wells!"

"But he went forward in time," I said. "I'd rather go backwards!"

Elizaveta laughed, "So you ARE a true Orthodox Russian! Going back to the glory days of Russia or Constantinople!"

"I suppose so. What else interests you?"

"Besides you?"

"I think we can take that one for a given," I chuckled.

"You're very sure of yourself!"

"YOU are the one who came after me, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)!" ("Kitten")

Elizaveta laughed, "I did. I like murder mysteries, too. I've read most of Agatha Christie's books."

"Should I be worried?"

"You!" she exclaimed. "That will cost you TWO kisses, so now it's six!"



August 24, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"What are you doing today?" Lara asked as we headed to breakfast with Jocelyn, Dona, and Clarissa.

"José and I are going to do a run-through at Doctor Blahnik's house with Milena at 2:00pm. Other than that, no specific plans."

"How long will that take?"

"About ninety minutes," I replied. "And we don't mind an audience."

"Any change at home?"

"No. I figure I'll call home in a couple of weeks. When you asked before about plans, was there anything specific you wanted to do?"

"Not really. When does the rest of the gang arrive?"

"Tomorrow, except José, who should be here before lunch today. I'm not sure if Rebekah is coming with him today or not, but I'd expect her to."

We had breakfast, then went back to my room to hang out until lunch, and after lunch, we went to Doctor Blahnik's house. Milena arrived about 1:45pm, and José arrived just before 2:00pm.

"No Rebekah?" I asked.

"She's not coming back to Taft."

"What?!" Clarissa and I both asked in surprise.

"She got a crazy job offer in Florida and decided to take it. She's going to take a year off, then go to Florida Atlantic University."

"What kind of job offer?" I asked.

"Basically house-sitting, but it's a real job. Some friend of her dad's from Chicago has a mansion there and needed someone to live there and manage the property."

"She's nineteen!" Clarissa protested.

José laughed, "That appears to be a major qualification if you get my drift."

"Who is this guy?" I asked.

"He runs some kind of big investment firm in Chicago. He just bought the place in Boca Raton and asked Rebekah to manage it for him."

"Crazy."

"Crazy is how much she's being paid. Full room and board, and \$600 per week."

"I've never made more than \$200 a week, and that was with overtime!" I protested.

"It's a different world. This guy has a house in Saint Martin, which I think Rebekah mentioned to you guys. I was down there with her and some friends over the Summer."

"Unreal," I said, shaking my head. "Well, let's practice."

We went to the music room, where Milena was already warming up. José and I took our guitars from our cases and quickly reviewed the three sets we'd do for the concert.

"Ready to go?" Milena asked.

"Absolutely!" I replied.

"Yep!" José agreed.

Our run-through went well despite not having played together all Summer. Our repertoire hadn't changed too much -- we added a few new songs and dropped a few, which each of us had practiced individually over the Summer.

"Who are you singing to?" Milena asked.

"Me!" Lara declared.

"You're not a Freshman!" Milena teased. "He has to sing to a Freshman!"

"I have an idea," I said. "What if José sings to Dona?"

"Who?" José asked.

"A very sexy Freshman who was here for Summer session and who is available. She's really nice and a lot of fun. She was Jocelyn's roommate over the Summer, and Clarissa got her moved from 6 to 8."

"I'm game," he grinned.

"There you go," I said. "Problem solved!"

"And the baton is passed to someone new!" Milena declared.

We spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing, then had dinner with Doctor Blahnik and Derek before we headed to the auditorium for the concert. I introduced José and Dona, and we met her roommate for the semester, a perky blonde named Cynthia from Akron. The concert went off without a hitch and, as was the case the previous year, received rave reviews from the assembled incoming Freshmen. José had lots of attention, but I kept Lara on my arm to deflect any potentially interested girls, especially Mindy. Joel had arrived just before the concert started and had Milena on his arm to help her ward off the hordes of horny Freshman boys.

"You're VERY good, Mischa!" Tasha said.

"I agree," Nikolas said. "You three sing very well."

I'd been a bit concerned about his reaction to a few of the songs, but he didn't seem to be bothered by anything.

"Thanks," I replied.

"There's a small afterparty at my house," Milena said to Tasha. "You're invited if you want to come."

"Sure!"

Milena, Joel, Clarissa, Abby, Jocelyn, Bill, José, Dona, Cynthia, Tasha, Nikolas, Lara, Sarah, and I headed to Doctor Blahnik's house where we spent a few hours hanging out before everyone headed back to the dorms, or in the case of Joel and Milena, and Tasha and Nikolas, home.



August 26, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

The rest of our friends had arrived on Saturday, and we caught up on what had happened over the Summer. There were no other great revelations, such as Rebekah not returning, and everyone was ready for a new semester. Sandy and Fran had both scored well on the MCAT, in the 85th percentile, which meant neither of them would have any difficulty getting into the medical school of their choice, which for Sandy was McKinley Medical School, and for Fran was Ohio State.

On Sunday morning, Lara and I went to church, and after the services, lunch, and Sunday School, Tasha took Lara home so I could take Elizaveta for ice cream. Elizaveta was about to burst with excitement at our first 'date', but before

we left the church, I verified with Mr. Kozlov that I'd take her straight to Verner's and then bring her directly home.

"How often are you free from direct adult supervision?" I asked.

"When I babysit and sometimes when I'm with my friends, why?"

"Please don't take this wrong, but when we're at your house, you aren't the same person who accosted me on the bench outside the church building."

"My grandmother would KILL me if I acted in any way she felt was unladylike or «некультурный» (*nekulturny*). So I need to be very, very careful."

"So, which is the real you? The young woman who very aggressively asserted herself or the demure, almost childish girl in the garden?"

"Do you behave the same in public as you do in private?"

"No," I chuckled, remembering a very similar conversation about my 'coarse jesting'.

"And the wife of a deacon must be demure and «культурный» (*kulturny*) in public?" ("proper")

"Yes, of course."

"And in private, she's allowed to let her hair down?"

"Yes."

"Then the answer is, they are both the 'real' me. In public, the well-respected wife of a deacon; in private, the fun-loving wife of a doctor. You remember I asked you to remove your cassock so I could kiss you, right?"

"I do."

"Because I understand what it means. And as a subdeacon, you could remove your cassock in public. As a deacon, not very often, unless it's required for work."

"True."

"In private, I can remove my mask, if you want to call it that, along with everything else!"

I chuckled, "Kisses?"

"I believe that is how it starts! I don't know nearly as much about *that* as I do cooking, cleaning, sewing, or taking care of babies, but I do know how it works!"

"So you've said."

"And just why do you think my mom and grandma keep a VERY close watch on me?"

"To ensure that everything happens in the correct order."

"Unlike with Sasha Antonova. All my friends from church were under a bit more supervision once it became known she was pregnant."

I nodded, "I believe that happened with some of the girls at Holy Transfiguration as well."

"Do you remember when I asked you if you thought I was too young?"

"Yes."

"I may only be fifteen, but I know what I want and what I want to be. If you're concerned, ask me anything you want, and we can talk about it. I think I told you I read a lot, mostly mysteries and science fiction. Well, besides what we've had to read for school like Shakespeare, Poe, or things like *Animal Farm*."

"What kind of science fiction?"

"Besides *The Time Machine*? I've read *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*."

"I would never have guessed!"

"I told you about Agatha Christie and H. G. Wells!"

"You did. It's just, well, never mind. I wasn't thinking correctly."

"As far as I can tell, boys have that problem quite a bit!"

"And the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*) is there to keep them in line and make sure they think correctly."

Elizaveta laughed, "Yes, of course. Even the bishop is afraid of going against them!"

"So all those books -- you chose to read them, right? They weren't school assignments?"

"You mean the science fiction? Yes, I chose to read them. I like them because they make me think, but I also like science fiction in general. Have you read *Stranger in a Strange Land*?"

"Yes."

"Did you catch the allusion that Valentine Michael Smith was an incarnation of Michael the Archangel?"

I chuckled, "I might have noticed, given Michael is my patron!"

"Do you think that the way Smith was treated is what would happen if someone like that showed up today?"

"I'd say that if Jesus Christ showed up today, He'd be murdered even quicker than He was in first-century Palestine. Or locked in a mental asylum."

"Because He'd be a serious threat to the powers that be?"

"Exactly. Just as He was during Roman times."

We arrived at Verner's, and I ordered a single scoop of chocolate in a sugar cone, and Elizaveta got a single scoop of strawberry in a cup. Once we had our ice cream, we went outside to sit on a bench in front of the shop.

"I'm going to be away next weekend," I said. "But I will come to dinner on Thursday. I just need to leave by 6:45pm to get back to campus for study group. Also, your dad wants to change the day I come to your house."

"He told me. Saturdays at noon, right?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going next weekend?"

"Pittsburgh," I replied.

"To see her family," Elizaveta said calmly.

"Yes. I haven't met them; I have met yours."

"And that's part of the equation, isn't it? Family?"

"Your dad certainly thinks so," I replied.

"Oh, I agree."

We ate our ice cream in silence, which gave me time to think about Elizaveta and Lara, the same thing about which I was sure she was thinking. My thinking on the choice had gone back and forth between the two, and I truly didn't have an answer. My conversation with Clarissa had helped to clarify the issues but certainly hadn't resolved them. That said, I had clarified one thing -- Elizaveta wasn't the intellectual lightweight I'd thought she was. While she wasn't like Clarissa or Jocelyn, she was very much like Tasha had been at fifteen.

"Mishka," Elizaveta asked, "could I collect one of those kisses?"

A relatively chaste kiss ran little risk, even if we were seen, so I nodded and leaned toward her. Our lips touched, and I got the faintest taste of strawberry.

"Now I only owe you five," I grinned.

Elizaveta laughed, "I'm sure you'll say or do something silly to increase the number again."

"Because I'm a guy?"

"Yes!"

I took her empty ice cream cup and napkin and tossed them, with my napkin, into the trash. We walked back to my car, and I helped her into the passenger seat. I walked around, got in, started the car, and headed towards her house.

"Did I allay your concerns?" Elizaveta asked as I headed north, out of town.

"Yes."

"Good."

When we arrived at her house, I walked her to the door, ensured her parents knew she was home, then headed back to campus. I was back in my room on Rickenbacker 8, having moved my things on Wednesday evening to make way for the RA, who was moving onto Rickenbacker 2. I hadn't been back long when the gang began assembling in my room, now with the addition of Lara, Jocelyn, Sarah, Dona, Grace, Cynthia, and Bill. That made for a crowded room, but with Lara, Clarissa, and me sitting on the bed leaning against chair pillows supported by the wall and a couple of people on the floor, we made it work.

"I think we should get you a few beanbag chairs," Sophia said. "If you don't mind, I'll pick them up. We can always use them in our rooms next year after you graduate."

"Fine with me," I replied.

"Same study schedule this year?" Sandy asked.

"I think so, yes. We're going to need to meet with Doctor Norris and Doctor Stanton to get our research signed off. If we hadn't done that, I wonder what we might have done. Any thoughts?"

"Any biology topic, right?" Fran asked. "And I'm interested because OUR project didn't count for both years."

"That's what the course catalog says," Clarissa replied, "but it does need approval from either the Biology or Chemistry Department."

"What about something totally off the wall?" Sandy asked. "Is there a correlation between blood chemistry and type and academic performance?"

"How would you control that?" Fran asked.

"I'm not sure you'd need to, at least in the first stage."

"Are you talking about the entire student body?" Clarissa asked. "That's a HUGE number of blood tests, and you'd have to repeat them at intervals, not to mention getting grades released. It's an interesting idea, but I doubt we could make that happen in the next year."

"True. Maybe something with DNA?"

"Or disease?" I asked. "You know, the spread of influenza and the efficacy of various palliative treatments?"

"Food poisoning?" Lara asked.

We all laughed.

"You know," Clarissa said, "that actually might be interesting. The Health Department would have all kinds of information, as would the hospital. But what would they study? The Health Department always reports the causes and mitigations. A DNA study would mean getting a lot of samples and then trying to get the computer time. I'm not sure they can do that. The disease thing would require lots of student participation."

"Which you think I can't count on?" Fran asked.

"I'd hate for my grade to depend on that, wouldn't you?" Clarissa asked.

"True," she agreed.

"But, you could probably do something with Polymerase Chain Reaction," I said. "That was part of the big coöperative project we were part of. There are plenty of samples you could get from the hospital, and if you combine it with the stuff your group did last year, maybe you do something to look for genetic markers for cancer? I think the computer time would be manageable because it would just be statistical stuff."

"I like that idea," Fran said. "It fits nicely with our coursework. I'll make an appointment to talk to Doctor Norris this week."

"What about you, Sophia?" I asked.

"Robby, Lee, and I signed up for a tuberculosis study at the hospital."

"Jason?" I asked.

"I have a meeting with Doctor Norris on Tuesday. He has something special for me to do to prep for my Master's and PhD."

"Fran, are you still thinking OSU or McKinley?"

"OSU. We'll find a place between here and there, probably close to where Milena and Joel live."

"Did you meet the new Freshmen?" Jason asked.

"Three of them are here," I replied. "The others seem OK, and both Michelle and I talked to them about what's expected of people on Rickenbacker 8. It appears that somebody in student housing hand-selected who to put on this floor."

"Now we just have to keep it sane NEXT year," Sophia said.

"You, Robby, or Lee should sign up to be RAs. Heck, you and one of the guys could RA the floor."

"He has a good point," Lee said. "Robby, you up for that?"

"Let me think about it."

We hung out until dinner, which we had in the cafeteria, then went to Doctor Blahnik's house for a 'start of the semester' party. We returned to the dorm about 11:30pm, and everyone went to bed.



August 27, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday morning, we had our usual 'start of the semester' breakfast, and after we ate, Clarissa, Sandy, and I headed for our first class of the day, Modern Social Issues, with Doctor Helen Daugherty. She had a good reputation as a fair grader

who was happy to hear opinions from everyone and graded well so long as the opinion was properly supported by a cogent argument.

"If you review the syllabus which I've just handed out," she said, "you'll see we're going to start in 1957, a very important year in the history of modern society. Late that year, Sputnik was launched. The next year, Elvis Presley was inducted into the US Army, and less than ten years later, Haight-Ashbury came into prominence, and the first 'head shop' opened. And that covers the student nickname for this course 'Sex, Drugs, and Rock-and-Roll!'"

There was general laughter in the class.

"But it's deeper than that, of course. The US transitioned from the world of *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* to *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*. From a world where Lucy and Ricky had to sleep in separate beds and couldn't say the word 'pregnant', to frank discussions of sex on the radio by Doctor Ruth Westheimer. We'll look at those changes, and others, and how they've affected American society. Now, I'll begin with our first lecture, setting the stage of post-War America."

What I found most interesting about the lecture was that the world Doctor Daugherty was describing was the world in which I'd grown up in West Monroe. It really was *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, or *Father Knows Best*. I'd realized that, to a point, when I'd come to McKinley, but the way she was describing it brought clarity to my thinking.

"Sounded like home?" Clarissa asked as we walked to Analytical Chemistry.

"To a 'T'," I replied. "Which is exactly why I want to stay in the area."

"It certainly fits your personality," she replied.

Analytical Chemistry was, in effect, just another chemistry class. The one difference would be that we'd be making use of equipment and methods which we hadn't used before, including spectroscopy and mass spectrometry. It was a lab course, but with Clarissa and Sandy as lab partners, it wouldn't be quite as grueling.

After class, we hung out in my room until lunch with most of the gang and then headed to Reproductive Physiology. The syllabus showed that we'd start with puberty and the generation of spermatozoa and the release of ova and finish with lactation. The most interesting modules, at least for me, were about female physiology because, beyond secondary sex characteristics, I had only the most basic knowledge. And it turned out I wasn't alone.

"For those of you in pre-med," Doctor Nicole Short said, "you'll find that male physicians of a certain age, that is, those who graduated from medical school more than ten years ago, have little to no knowledge about female physiology beyond menstruation, pregnancy, and delivery. Female sexuality was taboo, even for physicians specializing in gynecology. I would hope we're turning out more enlightened doctors now. Our starting point is going to be puberty and the development of secondary sex characteristics. If you take out your textbooks and turn to Chapter 1, we'll begin our lecture."

The lecture was interesting, and the time flew by, such that when Doctor Short concluded the lecture, I was disappointed that the class was over. I packed up my things, and Clarissa, Sandy, and I headed for Cellular Biology, which was being taught by Doctor Stanton. It was our last actual biology course, as the one during our final semester was really a second-semester statistics course.

When we finished class, we assembled back in my room to hang out until the gang was ready for dinner. That evening, after dinner, we had our first study session, after which Lara and I spent some time together before she headed back to her room.



August 30, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday, after my guitar lesson, I headed to the country club to play my first-ever round of golf with Mr. Kozlov. Because I was slow and took about twice as many strokes to complete each hole, we only played 9 holes before returning to the Clubhouse and then going to the dining room.

"Don't get frustrated, Subdeacon," Mr. Kozlov said as we sat down for our meal.

"I'm comparing it to when I learned to play chess and when I started karate. It took time and practice to improve my skills."

"A good attitude, for sure. How has your first week of classes gone?"

"About the same as usual," I replied. "None of the classes will be too difficult, though the lab will require quite a bit of work. I actually think we'll end up needing less total study time once the semester gets going."

"Have you heard from any other medical schools?"

"I received an invitation to schedule an interview at UC today. I have to call them tomorrow to set it up."

"And you're also waiting on OSU, Pittsburgh, and Indiana?"

"Yes."

"Everything seems to be going according to your plan."

"At least in terms of destination, the path to get there has been very different from the one I expected."

"In business, I've learned to adapt, improvise, and overcome. You make plans, but you have to change it in response to business conditions. If you simply assume everything is going to go the way you planned, you'll be out of business fairly quickly. I think you'll find that to be true, not just with your training, but in medical practice."

I nodded, "I've heard that from doctors I've spoken to. They say all kinds of unexpected things occur, especially in the emergency room."

The waiter came to the table to take our orders, and after he left, we continued our conversation. Mr. Kozlov never once mentioned Elizaveta, and I could tell he was being very careful not to push directly, though clearly, the golf and the dinners were his way to bring me into his orbit.

When we finished dinner, I thanked him, then headed back to campus for study group and then to spend time with Lara.

XVIII. Dénouement

August 31, 1984, Duquesne, Pennsylvania

"Anything I need to know?" I said as we neared Lara's house.

"Not really. I told you about both sets of parents."

"Names? I mean, other than I know your biological dad is Sergei Viktorovich Federov."

"My step-mom is Alisa, my stepdad is Albert, and my biological mom is Elena. My step-siblings are Karolina and Pavel. Oh, and my cat is named Lilia Felicksovna Koshkaa," she added with a laugh.

"Cute! I take it that your stepdad's house is typically American?"

"Yes. My biological dad's house is pretty typically American, too. Remember, it was my maternal grandmother who taught me Russian."

"So then, much like my house," I replied. "Other than our icon corner, you wouldn't know we were Russian, and once my grandmother stopped watching us in the afternoons after school, there wasn't much Russian in the house."

"Turn right at the stop sign," she said.

I did, turning into a neighborhood of large houses and huge lots.

"First right, then first driveway."

I followed her directions and pulled into a long driveway which led to a house which dwarfed my parents' house and, for that matter, the Malenkovs' and Kozlovs' houses.

"Park in the empty spot to the left of the garage."

I pulled up, parked, and we got out of the car. We got our bags from the trunk, then I followed Lara to the front door and into the house.

"Good evening, Miss Laura," an Hispanic woman who was in the hallway said.

"Hi, Luisa," she replied. "This is my friend Mike."

"Your dad has him in the blue guest room."

"I'll show him," Laura said. "Where are my parents?"

"In the TV room," Luisa replied.

"Thank you," Lara said. "Follow me, Mike."

She led me upstairs and to a large bedroom which had its own couch and TV, a large bed, and its own bathroom. I set my bag on the bed and followed Lara to her room.

"Seriously?" I chuckled.

"What?!" she asked with a smirk.

Her room looked like a warehouse for a company which made stuffed animals, of which cats and rabbits seemed to be the majority. In addition, there were *Care Bears* posters on the walls.

"Stuffed animals and *Care Bears*? Really?"

"Hey, I'm entitled to enjoy whatever I want!"

"Sure, but it's such a contrast!"

A calico cat came into the room and rubbed against Lara's leg. Lara scooped her up and rubbed noses, then put the cat down.

"I take it that's Lilia?"

"Yes. Are you over your shock enough to meet my parents?"

I chuckled, "I think so."

I followed her downstairs, with the cat doing her best to trip us as we went down the stairs. We passed through two rooms before we came to a room that looked almost like a movie theatre, with reclining chairs and a projection TV. I'd never actually seen one, except in a store.

"Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!" Lara called out.

"Hi, Honey!" her mom replied.

Both her parents stood up.

"Mom, Dad, this is Mike. Mike, my stepdad Albert Bragg, and my mom Elena Bragg."

"Pleased to meet you both," I said.

I shook hands with Mr. Bragg.

"Nice to meet you, Mike," he said. "Can we get you something to drink? Tea? Coffee? Pop?"

"A Sprite or 7-Up would be good, thanks."

"Laura?"

"7-Up is fine."

Mr. Bragg pressed a button on a small box on the table and spoke into it. A female voice, presumably Luisa, spoke back. He asked for two 7-Ups and received an acknowledgment. He picked up a remote and turned off the TV.

"How was your drive?" he asked.

"No trouble at all," I replied.

"Please make yourself at home while you're here."

"Thank you."

"Laura tells me that you scored in the 98th percentile on your MCAT."

"That's right."

"And you want to go to McKinley Medical School?"

I nodded, "I do."

"With scores like those, you could go anywhere -- Harvard, Yale, Stanford, UCLA, Cornell."

I nodded, "That's true, but I prefer being close to home."

"You could practice there after going to one of the top schools."

"I could, but I prefer to stay in the area. My second and third choices are University of Cincinnati and Ohio State. My backups are Indiana and Pittsburgh."

He shook his head, "It just seems a waste of very, very good scores."

I wasn't sure what else to say to him, so I just stayed quiet. Fortunately, Luisa came in just then with two bottles of 7-Up. Lara and I each thanked her, and she left.

"What do your parents do, Mike?" Mrs. Bragg asked.

"My dad is a supervisor in the Harding County Property Division, and my mom is a legal secretary."

"I see," she replied.

I was getting an odd feeling from Lara's parents, one of disapproval of my choice of schools and of my parents' choices of careers. I wasn't quite sure what to do or say, so once again, I remained quiet.

"I'm going to give Mike a tour," Lara said.

She took my hand and led me from the room, beginning a tour of the ground floor of the house.

"Sorry," she said quietly.

"Your stepdad doesn't approve."

"He didn't approve of me going to Taft, either. He felt I should go to an Ivy League school, but in the end, he said it was up to me. From my perspective, I don't need to spend \$30,000 a year on tuition and room and board to teach High School. And given that you need to borrow, why go to a more expensive school? If you were going to do research, maybe it would make sense."

"And your mom's reaction to what my parents do for a living?"

"Honestly, I have no clue. That I didn't expect at all."

"You might have told me your parents had a maid."

Lara shrugged, "It's like the 'vette -- I don't want anyone to think of me as something I'm not. And don't worry about them. I make my own decisions."

My initial estimate of the size of the house was borne out, and it was much bigger than the Kozlov's house. The basement was finished and had a built-in bar, as well as a pool table. The ground floor had, in addition to the TV room, a large great room, a dining room, a large kitchen, and a study. Upstairs were five large bedrooms, with the master bedroom having a whirlpool bath that looked big enough for four.

"Does Luisa live here?" I asked.

"Yes, her room is off the kitchen and has a private bathroom. Why don't we go to my room and listen to some music and talk?"

"I don't want your parents to think I'm rude."

"They won't. We'll join them for breakfast in the morning."

We went into her room, she turned on her stereo, and we sat down on the couch, Lara cuddled close and I put my arm around her.

"Just remember, Mike; this is my parents, not me. I'm the girl you see at school."

"I don't have much room to talk," I said. "We can't even see my parents right now."

"So we agree our families aren't part of the decision-making process?"

I felt that ought to be true, but I thought about Elizaveta's family, who had welcomed me with open arms and were already treating me as a son-in-law. While it wasn't a deciding factor, I couldn't ignore it.

"I'm not going to hold your parents against you if you don't hold mine against me," I replied.

Lilia found her way into the room, hopped up onto the couch, and settled in Lara's lap.

"Want to pet my pussy...cat," she teased.

"Cute!"

"Hey, you're the one who bought me the little pussy...cat with black fur!"

"True," I said with a laugh. "How old is your pussy...cat?"

"Six. She's my second one. The first one my parents had when I was born, and he died about six years ago, right before I got Lilia when she was a kitten."

"Is her name really Lilia Felicksovna Koshkaa?"

"No," Lara laughed softly, "but I knew you would get the *Felix the Cat* joke."

"What's the plan for tomorrow?" I asked.

"The same as we discussed earlier in the week. Breakfast with my parents, then a day in Pittsburgh, including dinner. As for Sunday, we'll go to church in the morning and then spend the day with my dad, step-mom, and half-siblings. They only have one guest room, so unless one of us sleeps on the couch, we'll come back here for the night. Then, on Monday, we'll head back to Taft."

"Sounds good."

"You know what sounds good right now?" Lara asked.

"What?"

"Making out!"



September 2, 1984, Greater Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

"Dad, this is Mikhail Petrovich; Mike, this is my dad, Sergei Viktorovich," Lara said when we met her family outside the church.

"Nice to meet you," I said, extending my hand.

"We've heard so much about you from Lara! Once the services are finished, we'll skip lunch and Sunday School and head home so we can get to know you."

"Thanks!"

"Allow me to introduce my wife, Alisa, my daughter, Karolina, and my son, Pavel."

"Nice to meet all of you!"

"*Hot!*" I heard Karolina whisper to Lara.

She was, I guessed, about twelve, and her brother about eight, which lined up with the timing of the divorce Lara had told me about.

"Shall we go in?" Mr. Federov suggested.

I put on the cassock I'd carried from my car, and we went into the church. While the others waited in the nave, I went to the right-hand deacon's door and asked to speak to the priest. The acolyte, seeing my cassock, allowed me in, and the priest beckoned me to a small side room. I asked his blessing, which he gave, and then kissed his hand.

"Subdeacon Michael, I presume? I'm Father Philip."

"Yes, Father. I wanted to confirm with you that it's OK to receive the Eucharist."

"You've confessed in the last month?"

"Yes."

"And are you in good standing with your bishop?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then, by all means. If you would like to serve, you're welcome to join us."

"I'd rather worship with Lara Federov and her family, if you don't mind."

"Not at all! It was good to meet you!"

"And you."

I left and went to stand next to Lara. As I stood quietly, reciting the pre-communion prayers, my mind went to the night-and-day difference between Lara's two families. The Braggs were stuffy and cold, whereas the Federovs were welcoming and warm. I pushed those thoughts from my mind and focused on worship. About three-and-a-half hours later, when the liturgy was finished, Lara and I left the church building. I removed my cassock, put it in the trunk, and then she and I headed to the Federovs' house.

The house, in Robinson township, was very similar to Katy's house, and much more modest than the Braggs'. Whereas I'd almost felt like I was in a hotel at the Braggs', here I felt as if I was in a home and that I was very welcome. Her dad and step-mom were very nice, and her step-sister clearly had a crush on me, while her step-brother was, as best I could tell, a normal eight-year-old.

We had a nice lunch, then hung out in the spacious backyard, and I got to know her dad. He didn't seem bothered by my choice of schools and didn't have a negative reaction to my parents' jobs. All in all, I got the feeling he liked me, whereas all I could say for Albert Bragg was that he tolerated me. It was obvious that Lara took after her biological dad, and that was a good thing.

About midway through the afternoon, Lara asked me to take a walk with her.

"Feel better?" she asked as we walked hand-in-hand down the sidewalk.

"Much," I replied. "This is like being amongst friends. With your stepdad, it felt almost like a formal job interview or maybe a police interrogation."

"I have to say it was a bit strange for me, too. That never happened with the few guys I dated."

"Yes, but you weren't planning to marry one of them in less than a year," I replied. "I get the feeling he doesn't think I'm good enough for you. Your biological dad, on the other hand, is making me feel like part of the family."

"True. But neither my stepdad nor my mom said anything negative to me."

"Well, it's not them I'm interested in marrying, so unless their opinion matters to you, it doesn't particularly matter to me."

"It does, but not enough to influence my decision. You know the issue I'm struggling with."

"Is that the only one at this point?"

"I think so."

"Clarissa's observation was that if I wasn't going to be ordained, this would be a 'done deal'."

"Except that if you weren't going to be ordained, then there wouldn't be a rush for YOU to decide, and you would have more options. I'm not saying you're being railroaded, by the way, just that from what I can tell, several of the girls you've been interested in, like Kimiko, created impediments to ordination."

Basically, you'd have had more time to find common ground if there wasn't a rush."

"I suppose that's true, but that's all speculative now unless I put off ordination for several years. I COULD do that, but I don't want to."

"It's your calling, Mike, just as being a doctor is your calling. I think you're making the right decision, even if it might not look that way to the outside world."

"Thanks," I replied, squeezing her hand. "I guess the question for you comes down to whether or not being 'Matushka Larisa', in addition to being a High School teacher, is your calling."

"I think that sums it up quite nicely."

And at that moment, I realized something. It wasn't her calling. If it had been, she wouldn't be struggling. That didn't mean it was impossible for her, but it did mean it wasn't going to be easy.

"But it's not your calling, is it? And that's why you're struggling."

"You knew?"

"I just put together all the pieces in my head. May I tell you what Clarissa actually said?"

"Sure."

"That you would make the perfect wife for a doctor and Elizaveta would make a perfect wife for a deacon."

"Angie was the one who could easily be both, wasn't she?"

I nodded, "Yes, though her condition calls everything into question. Does that upset you?"

"I'm practical, Mike, and I understand the situation. I had some good talks with Clarissa and Tasha both before the Summer and since I've come back to Taft. And I've talked to Jocelyn, too. All three of those girls love you deeply and want what's best for you. Me, too."

"And you're trying to decide if you're best for me or not?"

Lara smiled, "I believe you think I am but with the caveat of me being able to live under a microscope."

"You can't successfully pretend to be someone you aren't," I said. "It's one thing for me to put my Prince album in a locked cabinet and only display Mozart or whatever. It's an entirely different thing to suppress your personality to please others. Maybe I'm worth it, but that's a heck of a sacrifice for you to make."

"Are you saying I shouldn't?"

"Not at all! We both know the commitment you'll have to make, and, to be honest, only you can decide to make it. There's a reason I haven't raised this with you before and why, other than the implied deadline of next Summer, I haven't pressured you at all."

"Far from it!" Lara declared. "You even gave up sex for me!"

"I guess the question that comes to mind is -- what next?"

"Do you know my biggest fear?" Lara asked.

"No."

"That I end up doing what amounts to stringing you along and making a big mess of things."

"There are no hard deadlines, Larisa," I replied.

"You say that, but you're walking a tightrope now with Elizaveta and me. If you fall off, you could lose both of us."

"Honestly, that has been my concern, but so far, there hasn't been a problem."

"But eventually, there will be," Lara said. "Maybe not now, but soon enough."

"Why do I have an uncomfortable feeling about this all of a sudden?" I asked.

"For the same reason I do, actually; you just haven't realized it."

"Realized it? What are you talking about?"

"There is a fundamental difference between going to church, or even serving as a subdeacon, and being a deacon."

"Yes, of course."

"In the same way, it's different for me going to church now, as Lara, then it would be as 'Matushka Larisa'. I actually didn't realize how much I missed going to church until I started going regularly with you, but think about it, Mike. Going to church as Father Deacon Michael and Matushka Larisa is a very, very different thing."

"I agree, obviously."

"Yes, but contrary to what everyone else, including you, thinks, being a deacon is the harder of the two callings. And I wonder why you don't think that's the case."

I stopped short, and Lara did as well after one additional step. She'd made a very good point, and one I hadn't even considered. But when I thought about it for a moment, I felt she was right, but perhaps not the way she meant it.

"For me, being an Orthodox Christian is simply who I am," I replied. "It's in my blood, if you will. My earliest memories are of my mom holding me up so I could kiss the icon of the *Theotokos*. I began serving as an acolyte and singing in the choir as soon as I was able, and from there, it's been a natural progression. In a sense, wanting to be a doctor is in my blood as well, or, perhaps, in the blood of that little girl I helped save in fourth grade.

"I feel both of those are my callings, though it was the bishop who identified my calling to be a deacon, whereas I identified my calling to be a doctor. Both callings require me to live under intense scrutiny, whether it comes from the church, members of the medical profession, or the public. I'm prepared for that, and in a sense, I've been living it ever since I first put on an acolyte's robes.

"As for difficulty, my struggle to walk as a Christian won't be any more difficult if I'm ordained a deacon than it is now. Will there be more scrutiny? Sure, but my interior life will still be the same as it is now. For medicine, I have to learn an entire new set of skills and learn how to put them into practice. And failure there isn't as simple as going to confession."

We began walking again.

"I think all of that is true," Lara said, "but the amount of scrutiny of your private life is very, very different. You could, as Doctor Mike, work out some kind of arrangement with Clarissa. As Deacon Michael, you most certainly can't."

"You mean in terms of some kind of marriage with a third person involved?"

"Or maybe you marry Jocelyn, and Clarissa has the babies, plus her own girlfriend."

"I'd have to leave the church completely to do either of those things because the scandal it would cause would be too great. And that's something I can't imagine doing. I'll give you a counterpoint to that -- if I decided to be some kind of mundane researcher instead, I might be able to be with Angie ten years down the road. It's not likely, but if I could give her the necessary time, who knows what might happen? But I can't give up being a doctor any more than I can give up being an Orthodox Christian."

"You've actually thought about those things, haven't you?"

"Yes. And talked about them, either with Doctor Mercer or Clarissa or, to a lesser extent, Jocelyn. And with you, now. Were you concerned I was going into this starry-eyed?"

"Not so much concerned, but needing to make sure you understood what you were actually signing up for."

"You didn't know me back when I was a Freshman, or worse, during my Senior year in High School. I was so focused on needing to do every single thing right to be a doctor that I forgot to live. Jocelyn noticed it before anyone, as I'm sure you can imagine, but so did Clarissa, and others. I had a number of failed relationships because I was wearing blinders. When I eventually took those off, I began to see the reality of the future in ways I never had before."

"One of the important things I learned is that I can't do this by myself. My original plan had been to wait until I finished my first two years of Residency before I started a family and perhaps not even marry until then. Tasha showed me a different way if you will, and that prepared me for what was coming. The downside, as I learned, is that Tasha discovered she wasn't cut out for life with me despite desperately wanting it for years.

"Through all of that, I realized that while I have to do the actual work, I need someone close to me to help me. Clarissa can play part of that role, but she's not a spouse, despite both our desires for that to happen. She's disqualified, if you will, by her sexuality, just as Angie is disqualified by her illness. And that seems to be something of a pattern -- girls disqualifying themselves because of what being married to me would mean.

"I had thought Maggie might be the right girl, though Tasha pointed me towards girls at church. I'd decided, though, that Maggie probably wasn't the right girl before she decided to break things off. It really was just a matter of timing as to who broke up with whom. And that brought me to the conclusion, with help from my friends, that I needed a girl who was 'cradle' Orthodox, though Angie would have also fit the bill."

"And then I walked into your life."

"Yes, but you walked in while all of that was being discussed. Things with Maggie didn't break down until after the semester ended, and the conversations with Doctor Mercer and Clarissa took place over the Summer."

"And if I hadn't?"

"Then I'd probably be focused on Elizaveta or perhaps gotten to know some of the girls at the Cathedral in Columbus. One thing I've learned is that life is

random, and you can't always predict how things will turn out or would have turned out. Jocelyn's accident was a real shock to me, but it was a necessary shock. I wish it hadn't happened to her, but something had to jar me out of a mindset that might well have led to disastrous consequences or a very unhappy life."

"Because you basically set everything aside for being a doctor, including relationships."

"Yes. It took regular beatings from several people, including one convert girl from Holy Transfiguration, to snap me out of it."

"I want to ask a question, and I don't want you to read too much into it, please. Just give an honest answer."

"I'll try my best."

"Is there a chance you would refuse ordination?"

"In the realm of possibilities, I'd say anything is possible, but I'd say the probability is vanishingly small."

"And the chance you'd give up on being a doctor?"

"Willingly? Asymptotically approaching zero. Is there a point to the two questions?"

"Just to ask the next question, to which I was pretty sure I knew the answer -- where you're able to compromise. Not medical training and not on your faith."

"Why do I get the feeling that you're about to tell me you don't think you can handle being a Matushka?"

"Will you answer another question for me? With complete honesty?"

"Sure."

"Who would make a better Matushka? Me? Or Elizaveta?"

"I answered that before," I replied. "when I told you what Clarissa said."

"Now, ask yourself this -- does it *really* matter if I can handle it? I mean, yes, it does in one sense, but given everything, what's the right choice for you to make?"

"You think it's Elizaveta because, in effect, she would be in her natural element."

"Actually," Lara said, "I think YOU think that which is what's important."

"And because you think being a good deacon is harder than being a good doctor and that being a deacon's wife is harder than being a doctor's wife, you're wondering why I would choose you. Well, assuming you can adapt. But now that I think about it, the question you think I need to answer is whether I should ask you to adapt or whether I should choose Elizaveta because she won't have to adapt."

"The problem, I think," Lara said with a soft smile, "is more complex than you imagine. You see this as simply what you need, but because you're going to be ordained, you also have to take into account what the congregation needs."

"Why are you arguing so hard against your own interests?"

"Am I?" Lara asked.

I chuckled, "You want to make sure that I do this with my eyes wide open."

"Yes."

"Even if you've basically argued me into thinking Elizaveta is the better choice?"

"Is she?"

"Before I say something that will change things between us, may I ask you a question? One you need to answer honestly."

"Sure."

"If, before you'd offered me my reward for saving you, you had known I was going to be ordained, would you have handled things differently?"

"You know full well that the answer to that will change things between us, just as your answer to my question."

"That non-answer is actually an answer," I said.

"Just as your non-answer was," Lara replied.

"This is not what I expected to happen today."

"Me either. I didn't plan it; it just happened."

"So, what would you have done differently?" I asked.

"Probably just left it at the reward, which, by the way, was at least as good for me as it was for you!"

"Which is basically what you said that day."

"I believe," Lara said with a smirk, "that after I spilled the beans, you asked 'now what?' and I responded that you should fuck me again and, if you wanted, ask me out. And, if not, you got a proper 'thank you' for saving my life, and I got a proper fucking for my first time!"

"That is how I remember it. Is this the end?"

"You have to answer that question, Mike. Not me."

"But don't you have a say in this?"

"You have to ask for me to give my answer. I can't make the decision for you, Mike, and neither can Clarissa, Jocelyn, Tasha, or anyone else."

"What about the arguments you've made for the past fifteen minutes? Should I ignore those?"

"No, of course not, nor the input you've received from the other girls. But the decision has to be yours."

"I don't think I can make that decision today."

"Take your time, Mike. I just want to make sure you've thought it through and that you make the right decision for you. You only have one chance to get it right. I believe you've said there are no 'do-overs' because of your ordination."

"True."

"Would you sleep with me tonight?"

"You made me promise to be chaste."

"I most certainly did NOT!" Lara said vehemently. "I simply told you it wasn't right for you to sleep with anyone else if you weren't sleeping with me!"

"True. I turned it into what amounted to a vow of chastity."

"And you told Father Nicholas," she said, sounding a bit exasperated.

"I did. And, after I confessed, I told Elizaveta I was behaving properly, if you will, but that I had experience in matters of love."

"Well, THAT completely backfired," she sighed.

"Oops," I said, chagrined. "I took that completely the wrong way, didn't I? You intended for that to mean we'd sleep together at some point before we married. But why not say something when I expressed my intention to wait."

"Intentions change; situations change. I guess I should have expected you to talk to Father Nicholas about it. It was an error in judgment on my part to ask for that commitment at that point."

"I'm not so sure about that," I replied. "It did make sense."

"Maybe."

We walked quietly for a couple of minutes, and I mulled over everything she'd said, along with the conversations I'd had with others, and it brought me to an obvious conclusion.

"*Dénouement*," I said quietly. "And here, where it can be kept completely private."

"That's up to you, Mike," she replied. "Beginning or ending. The fact that 'ending' was the conclusion you came to should tell you everything you need to know."

"I feel as if I misled you or something."

"How so? A few minutes ago, we talked about that first night and about how I had no designs other than losing my virginity to a guy I found attractive and interesting. Remember what I said the worst possible outcome would be?"

I nodded, "I do."

"And trust me, I got exactly what I wanted that night -- an expert fucking for my first time; two, in fact! We talked hypothetically about things, but neither of us made a commitment other than to explore. And, as you pointed out, there were things I didn't know beforehand. That's my fault, if you will, because you asking me on a date was never guaranteed. Remember what I said?"

"Yes, of course, that I could ask you on a date if I wanted to, but if not, you'd be happy with saying 'thank you'."

"And we didn't sleep together again after that. Why?"

"So that it didn't mess up our thinking," I replied. "And that made perfect sense, as did your requirement that I not be with anyone else if I wasn't going to be with you."

"Did you make any commitment to Elizaveta?"

"I was careful to simply express to her that I wasn't a virgin; that didn't seem to upset her."

"Don't you think she had a good idea that might have been the case? You've brought quite a few different girls to church."

"That's entirely possible, but I'm not sure there's any way to find out, nor do I think it would be wise to discuss it beyond what I said."

"So the real problem is Father Nicholas?"

"The *real* problem is sin; the effect is having a *very* uncomfortable conversation with Father Nicholas."

"I guess then it comes down to whether you're willing to have that conversation."

"Let me think about it, please."

We walked back to her dad's house, where we had a good afternoon and a nice dinner. In between the conversation, I had time to think about the situation. I hadn't reached any conclusions by dinner time, and after we ate, Lara and I headed back to her stepdad's house.

"Your dad and stepmom are awesome," I said. "And your half-siblings are cool."

"Karolina has a huge crush on you," Lara replied. "But at twelve, that's kind of normal, I think. And Pavel was basically in awe of you."

"He's eight?" I asked.

"Almost. His birthday is next month."

"I can't believe the difference between the two families," I said. "Your biological dad's family is totally down-to-earth."

"And my stepdad's is stuck-up and pretentious?"

"They were better yesterday, but you said it, not me. You also seemed surprised."

"I honestly think it has to do with the fact that they felt we were going to marry."

"Beneath your station?" I asked.

"I don't know, but as I said, it's strange because my dad insists I'm free to make my own decisions, and he's let me do that."

"You said he wasn't happy about you going to Taft, but what about your choice of career?"

"That, too. He felt I ought to be a lawyer or doctor. But you know how you say you're called to be a doctor? I feel the same way about being a math teacher and helping kids who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to excel."

"So, he's not REALLY willing to let you make your own decisions. Well, not when it's something with which he disagrees. I got the impression that your biological dad and your step-mom are happy with your choices."

"My dad was always happy if I was happy. He really wanted me to live with him, but given how things were in the early 70s, it just couldn't happen unless he made a complete scandal out of my mom's affair."

"And how will they react if I spend the night with you?" I asked.

"Honestly? At this point, I don't care. Are you saying you will?"

"Sin is always the easier option," I sighed. "The problem I have is that even knowing that, I have serious trouble resisting the temptation."

"I'd laugh, but we've discussed your struggles on that topic. I probably should apologize."

"No, you shouldn't. You told me what you wanted; I'm responsible for what I do about it."

"But temptation?"

"Is always there," I replied. "And in this case, I feel somewhat obligated because I took your request further than you intended."

"Obligated?"

"Maybe a poor choice of words, but I had a lover for a good chunk of the Summer while you were on your cruise."

"Which was before I asked you to stop."

"You knew?"

"I was reasonably sure, but I'm not upset about it in any way; you've kept every one of your promises to me. But I don't want you to spend the night with me because you think you have to."

"I said 'somewhat obligated'," I replied. "But that wouldn't be why I did it."

"Oh?"

"No, if I were to do it, it would be because I want to. And I do want to. But that doesn't mean I should. But things are actually more complicated now."

"How so?"

"Because I'm not sure *dénouement* was the right word. The more I think about it, the more I'm sure that I said it because I thought that's what YOU wanted. But I don't think that's the case. And if we go to bed, it's either the beginning or the ending, not something in between. I'm not ready to propose to anyone, but I'm also not ready to throw in the towel with you unless you tell me unequivocally you can't be a deacon's wife."

"Seriously? You'll only sleep with me if we're breaking up or if we're getting engaged?"

"If you think about it, it does make sense, at least in my own twisted logic."

"Because sex would affect your judgment," Lara said after a moment's thought.

"Exactly. But now you have to explain why you were arguing so hard against me choosing you."

"I think you know exactly why," Lara said with conviction.

"Because you aren't sure you can handle being a deacon's wife. But, not sure is different from saying you can't handle it. And there's still time for you to work through your concerns. You aren't really ready to throw in the towel just yet, are you? You aren't ready to say for sure that you can't do it, are you?"

"No."

"Then don't!"

When we arrived back at her stepdad's house, we did go to her room, but it was only for a nice make-out session, after which we each got into separate beds. For

me, though sleep didn't come easy. I was trying to decide between Elizaveta and Lara, and just as Lara wasn't ready to throw in the towel, I wasn't ready to decide between them.

XIX. That Might Happen

September 3, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

When Lara and I returned to campus just before lunchtime, two McKinley police officers were in the lobby, blocking access to the elevators.

"What's going on?" I asked Nicky, a Senior who was manning the desk.

"An OD on 5," she said.

"Bad?"

"The paramedics went up about ten minutes ago. The cops will let you up, but you can't go to 5."

"Thanks. Any idea who it was or what they took?"

"No."

Lara and I headed to the mailboxes, where I retrieved letters from OSU and Indiana, which I was sure were invitations for interviews. I quickly opened them to find that was the case, and then we headed to the elevators. A police officer rode up to 8 with us, then went back down. Lara went to her room and came back to my room a couple of minutes later.

"Jocelyn and Clarissa aren't around, but I left a note," she said. "Would you put on *Born in the U.S.A.*?"

"Sure," I replied.

I put the Springsteen album on the turntable and adjusted the volume. I was just about to sit down when the phone rang. I walked over to the phone and answered.

"Mikey? It's Liz!"

"Hi! What's up?"

"Paul and I decided to get married in December!"

"And that won't cause a problem with his parole?"

"No. It's all cool."

"What day?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but we're just going to have a judge do it."

"If it's a weekday, that makes it difficult for me to be there, and I want to be there. When will you know?"

"Not until we talk to the clerk at the courthouse. Do you have any days free?"

"Tuesday and Thursday afternoons are free," I replied. "And our last exam is on the 21st."

"OK. When I find out, I'll call you."

"Are you going to tell Mom and Dad?"

"Why bother? Mom won't even discuss it with YOU!"

I took a deep breath and let it out, "I know. I guess I'll call Mom once you have more details."

"Thanks, Mikey! And guess what?"

"What?"

"It was just as good as I remember!"

I laughed, "Sorry, Lizard Breath, that doesn't bug me anymore!"

"Bummer! I'll call you in a few days."

"OK."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up. I walked over to the couch and sat down next to Lara.

"Liz and Paul decided to get married in December. They're going to use a judge, not a church ceremony."

"I guess that wasn't a surprise."

"No, it wasn't. The only question is which day they'll have the ceremony."

"And your parents?"

"As of right now, I'd say they won't be there. I'll do my best to work on my mom, but I'm not holding my breath. I really expected my mom to at least be talking to me about it by now."

"What are you going to do at Thanksgiving?"

"I have no idea," I replied. "A lot depends on Clarissa because I don't want her to be alone. It's not clear if her dad will come around or not. I'm sure I'll have an invitation from Jocelyn, and I'd expect one from the Kozlovs. I'm sure you're thinking about extending an invitation as well."

"The problem with that is this year, I'm having Thanksgiving dinner at my stepdad's house and Christmas dinner at my biological dad's house. I alternate meals each year."

"I won't let that be the deciding factor," I replied. "If we marry, I'm going to have to be around your stepdad, and he's just going to have to suck it up and deal with it. Well, I suppose he could go my dad's route, but I can't imagine him doing that despite the rather chilly reception."

"When do you think you'll know what you're doing?"

"I'll have to make a decision early in November," I said.

"I'm curious about something -- would you give Clarissa priority over your fiancée?"

"I'm not sure 'priority' is the right word; I do need to take her into consideration, though, given my commitment to support her as best I could after she had her falling out with her parents."

"Given everything you've said about her, I'm curious how you see her fitting into your marriage. Or maybe it's better to ask how your wife fits into your relationship with Clarissa. You're likely to see Clarissa more than you see your wife during medical school and your first couple of years of Residency."

"That particular conundrum has been on my mind for ages," I sighed. "I gave my word to Clarissa that we'd go to medical school together, do our Residency together, and practice together, and I really don't see how I could go back on that promise."

"When did you make that promise?"

"About two years ago and about that same time, we talked about finding some kind of solution that allowed us to have a baby together."

"You run THAT one by the bishop, and let me know how that works out for you!"

I nodded, "That is the obvious problem. And we talked about all kinds of off-the-wall solutions, including finding a bisexual girl or finding a straight girl who would be OK with Clarissa and me conceiving naturally or by artificial insemination."

"And here I thought you didn't do drugs!" Lara teased.

"I know. We even talked about marriage, but Clarissa needs a female partner to be fulfilled."

"Hang on a sec! You guys tried?"

"What I will say is we explored all the possibilities and came to the conclusion that other than artificial insemination at some point after medical school, there were no real options because of her sexuality and the teachings of the Church. And that's before any concerns my future wife might have with that idea."

"I'm curious; did you broach this with Tasha?"

"The idea of having a baby with Clarissa? Yes. She was taken aback, but she didn't rule it out completely, so long as it didn't involve adultery. But honestly, the bigger issue will be the potential scandal for the Church, and Clarissa and I have discussed that, too."

"I may not be completely up on all the teachings, but I can't imagine you donating sperm to a lesbian to have a baby would be anything other than a horrendous scandal."

"We know," I sighed. "Honestly, the only viable solution from the standpoint of the Church would be for Clarissa and me to marry, and that's not a viable solution for her."

"Can I ask you something very, very direct?"

"I think that's the only way forward."

"You are adamant about following the teachings of the Church and living a Christian life, except in one area."

"Sex," I replied with a wry smile. "It's been a struggle from the time I was fourteen -- hormones versus faith. And I've used every bit of self-justification and excuse to, in effect, 'get away with it'. I've tried, on a few occasions, to be chaste, but until now, I've managed to fall off the wagon every single time. Last night was a very close thing."

"Sorry."

I shook my head, "Don't be. That conversation was extremely valuable, even if we didn't resolve anything."

"Do you struggle with anything else?"

I shook my head, "Not really; every one of my struggles seems to revolve around sex or sexuality in some way. The other main one, besides actually having sex, would be abortion, but Doctor Evgeni gave me the answer -- do my OB/GYN training at a Roman Catholic hospital. I'll be able to have training in procedures for resolving a miscarriage without having to perform an elective abortion."

"Neatly cutting the Gordian knot, as it were."

"Ohio doesn't require training in abortion, so I did have an out, but it wasn't one I was willing to use because I believe I need to be trained to perform any procedures which my patients might need and which are appropriate for the ER."

"And if you didn't have the solution of a Roman Catholic hospital?"

"Then I'd have gone to the bishop and explained the dilemma and either delay or forego ordination so I could serve a year of penance for directly causing a death, similar to how soldiers are treated."

"So, in that one case, your faith wouldn't guide you?"

"There are Orthodox policemen who have justifiably shot and killed someone in the line of duty. They aren't going to Hell for doing their job any more than a soldier is going to Hell for doing his job. But it would be a major impediment to ordination, most certainly."

"But you won't make exceptions for anything else? I mean, besides things related to sex?"

"I've never found the need," I replied. "And remember, I agree with the teachings of the Church on sex, even if I haven't been able to keep them. Sin is, and I don't

mean this as an excuse, 'missing the mark'. As I've said, I've struggled with it from the time ridiculous amounts of hormones began coursing through my body."

"I'm a bit confused about that -- it didn't take anything, really, for me to talk you into bed. And you went not just willingly, but enthusiastically, with Sarah."

"I know," I replied. "I let myself get into a mindset that, in effect, once I'd done it with more than one person, it didn't matter. That kind of got out of control. The odd thing is, I struggled with the whole idea of 'how many is too many?' the Summer after High School. I thought I had it reasonably under control, and then I let a girl argue me into bed, and things kind of spiraled downward from there. It's one hundred percent my responsibility for allowing it to happen; I don't place any blame on that girl, or any other, for that matter. There are no Jezebels in my life, just a weak man."

"You've made a point about how your wife is going to live under a microscope, but you are as well. And that means every single public act, and probably most private ones, has to be dictated by not just the teachings of the Church but the expectations of the congregation. Are YOU sure you can live with that?"

"Is there something specific?"

"Your gay and lesbian friends, for example?"

"All of whom have been to church," I replied. "And they are welcomed by Father Nicholas. Yes, there is that deep-seated anti-homosexual sentiment amongst many Russians, but I'll point out that Jesus ate with publicans and sinners. I have talked with Father Nicholas about it, and he provided counsel.

"The key is demonstrating love for them without appearing to condone their behavior. Personally, I'd say the fact that they come to church, are respectful, and

listen to what is taught is a big win, no matter what happens. In the end, they're God's children as much as I am, and I certainly have no room to judge anyone's sexual sins."

"And you're truly prepared for every single thing you do, in every aspect of your life, to be scrutinized by the least understanding, most judgmental person in the parish? Or in the diocese, I guess."

I shrugged, "I'm not sure there's any way to avoid that. It sounds as if you're trying to talk me out of agreeing to ordination."

"No, I just want to hear your thinking."

"Actually, I think I can get to the crux of the issue," I said. "You're concerned that if I have to choose between making my wife happy and living how I'm expected to live, that I'll choose the latter."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

"Let me respond a different way, if I may. If the life of a patient depended on my upsetting or disappointing my wife because I had to break some kind of commitment, what should I do?"

"That's different, don't you think?"

"An obligation to my fellow man versus my obligation to God? I don't see how I can separate those, really."

"Your wife is going to be in third place, then? Or maybe fourth, if we count Clarissa. Deacon, doctor, husband; or Deacon, doctor, friend, husband. I guess 'dad' comes in fourth or fifth."

"When you put it that way..." I sighed.

"Am I wrong?"

"I...well, I don't think it's that simple."

"Tasha recognized it, didn't she?"

"Yes," I sighed, "she did. And so have you. With the same result, I suspect."

There was a knock at the door, and I wasn't sure what to do, but Lara tilted her head towards the door, so I got up to answer it. It was Michelle, the female RA on the floor.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You know about the student who OD'd, right?"

"I saw the cops on the way up."

"Dean Anderson knew you were away for the weekend but asked me to check if you were back. There's an emergency meeting at 1:00pm."

"Do you know any details?"

"No. You had a situation like this last year, right?"

"That was whippets," I replied. "Nothing really dangerous unless you totally deprive your brain of oxygen. Where's the meeting?"

"In the small auditorium in the administration building."

"I'll be there. Anything interesting happen over the weekend?"

"Nice and quiet on our floor, which is just how I prefer it!"

"Ditto," I agreed. "See you at the meeting."

She left, and I shut the door and went back to sit down to finish the conversation with Lara. Before I could even say a word, there was another knock at the door.

"Go on," Lara said.

I got up and opened the door to find Clarissa and Jocelyn.

"Lunch?" Clarissa asked.

"Can you wait ten minutes, please? I need to finish a conversation I'm having with Lara."

"Sure. We'll be in the lounge."

I closed the door and went to sit on the couch again.

"Sorry about the interruptions," I said. "I think my course of action is clear, though I'm going to need to have this conversation, minus some details, with Elizaveta before it's certain. I think, in the end, marrying me would not be good for you."

"You're sure about that?"

I nodded, "I am. The conversations yesterday and today made that clear to me. I don't mean this in any way but love, but you simply aren't cut out to be the wife of a deacon, with all that entails, especially given your analysis."

"And you think Elizaveta can handle that?"

"I think she has a very different personality from you or Tasha, and she reminds me of both Father Herman's and Father Nicholas' wives, as well as Deacon Grigory's wife. But I'll have to lay it out for her. It's not an easy road to travel, but I will say it's one she has considered, at least in the sense that she spoke to Doctor Evgeni's wife and Matushka Anastasia about it before she approached me."

"Because being a demure, conservative Russian comes naturally to her. In effect, she won't have to try with regard to her public life. The question you have to answer is whether or not she can provide what you need in your private life."

"I'd think by now you'd have realized my needs are pretty simple."

"Companionship, regular sex, and a mother to your children. And I don't mean that in any disparaging way. That is who you are, deep down."

"True. I'm sorry."

"For what?! You haven't lied to me, misled me, or mistreated me! In fact, you've bared your soul and have been brutally honest with me. We had the difficult conversations about things that might have tripped us up down the line, and you concluded that it's better if we don't marry. Remember, I'm not telling you 'no'; you're deciding not to ask."

"Because I know the answer."

Lara smiled, "In other words, you evaluated the situation and made a decision based on the knowledge you gained from our interactions. The same as you did with Tasha. I'm fairly sure she **WOULD** have married you had you asked. But you didn't ask because you learned that she wasn't the right girl for you. True?"

"True, though with both you and Tasha, I'd call it a mutual decision."

"You can test that theory by asking Tasha or me to marry you. Care to do that?"

I shook my head, "No, because I understand your point."

"Good. Then it's clear what you need to do -- fuck my brains out tonight, go to confession, ask Elizaveta's dad for her hand, and propose to her."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Ask her dad for her hand, and then propose."

I laughed hard.

"That's not quite what I was questioning," I said once I stopped laughing.

"I know! Just think about it, Mike."

"You know I'll pay a heavy price for that with Father Nicholas, given what I told him."

"I know. And that's why I said think about it. I'll understand. But we've been clear and upfront with each other on everything so far, so I felt I could be direct."

"Minus you hiding the fact you were Russian before you thanked me for saving your life! And that you were sixteen!"

"I know, but you understand why, right?"

"Yes, of course. I don't feel it was underhanded, given how I know I would have reacted, and I would have missed out completely on someone who I could truly consider for a life partner."

"Good. Shall we join the girls for lunch so you can get to your meeting?"

"Yes."

We left my room, went to the lounge to get Clarissa and Jocelyn, and then the four of us got into the elevator for the ride down. When we got to the lobby, the police were gone, so I stopped at the desk.

"Hey, Nicky," I said. "Any details?"

"No. The paramedics took her away, and the police finished whatever investigation they were doing. They left a few minutes ago."

"Any idea what year?"

"Freshman."

"Thanks."

We left the building and headed to the cafeteria for lunch. The girls chatted throughout lunch, which gave me time to consider not just Lara's request but the course of action, which seemed obvious. There was one additional step which I needed to take, and that was to speak to Vladyka ARKADY to ensure there were no concerns on his part.

I suppressed a laugh when I realized that the biggest concern was actually Lara's request. I had finally arrived at a point where I was able to be chaste, and I was being confronted with what I suspected was the only offer that would actually

tempt me. And I was tempted. And I also knew it was going to be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to resist the temptation, despite the grief I'd get from Father Nicholas, and rightly so.

When we finished lunch, the girls went back to the dorm, and I headed to the small auditorium and took a seat next to Michelle. She was a good student, fun to be around, and totally mellow, which made her a perfect RA for Rickenbacker 8. She was also pretty and had the alleged tradition of RAs sleeping together been true, I certainly wouldn't have minded. I shoved those thoughts out of my head, realizing it was EXACTLY those kinds of thoughts that led to me going to confession regularly.

"Cover for me tonight?" I asked.

"Sure," she replied. "Can you cover next Friday for me?"

"Yes."

"Interested in a sleepover next Saturday?" she asked.

I managed to avoid laughing out loud, but only just at the craziness that occasionally surrounded me. It was almost as if all I had to do was think of something, and the opportunity would present itself.

"Very, very tempting," I replied. "And as much as I'd like to, I'm in a relationship which wouldn't allow it."

"If things change..."

I nodded as Dean Anderson took the stage and tried to push the thoughts of Michelle's long legs wrapped around me or her full lips...I shook my head and tried to focus, not having much luck, as my brain created images of what

Michelle might look like naked. If this was what two months of chastity caused, I wasn't sure how I'd survive the next nine or ten months.

"Thank you all for coming despite this being a day off," Dean Anderson began. "A few people are missing, but we'll fill them in later. Today, we had the fifth case of drug-related emergency response in the past six months, and I'm obviously concerned. To that end, we're going to begin two new programs -- one directed at discouraging drug use and alcohol abuse, and one directed at student mental health."

I knew about two instances -- the whippets and today's incident, but there were obviously more, and I'd missed even the rumors, though I didn't get much gossip from other dorms.

"In the interim," Dean Anderson continued, "I want to encourage all of you to make an extra effort to get to know everyone on your floors and watch for any signs of drug use, drunkenness, or problems adapting to college life. I know you're all concerned about being turned into narcs, so I'm implementing a new policy, which I will take to the Student Life Committee, that anyone who seeks help from Student Health Services for drug use or alcohol abuse will NOT be punished, but will receive the necessary help to deal with their problems. We're NOT asking you to turn them in but to encourage them to get help.

"For the students who seem to have trouble adapting to college life, please follow the instructions we gave you during orientation. Make sure they know about the resources available to them -- tutoring, mentoring, and academic counseling, as well as mental health counseling from Student Health Services. Encourage them to make use of the assistance, and don't be afraid to seek input from my office or Student Health Services if you have a serious concern. Are there any questions?"

A female RA in the front row stood up.

"Dean Anderson, what happened today?"

"We're not sure if it was an accidental or intentional overdose of medication, but signs point to intentional. I can't say more than that."

Which immediately called to mind Jocelyn's suicide attempt and my sister's drug abuse, as well as the incident with Jillian when she'd messed up her blood sugar the previous Summer. I wondered if Dean Anderson was including that in her tally, but it really didn't matter.

A second female RA stood up.

"Dean Anderson, I know the rules, but almost everyone drinks at one time or another."

"Technically, beer is legal for anyone who is nineteen, but it's not permitted on campus. Wine and liquor aren't legal until you're twenty-one, and they aren't permitted on campus, either. What students do off campus is their business, though it is a violation of the dorm and campus rules to be drunk on school property. Responsible drinking off campus by those old enough is not the problem. Drunkenness is a problem. Does that answer your question?"

"Do we report drunkenness?"

"It is a violation of the rules. If the person doesn't have alcohol on their person, we'll deal with it via counseling alone unless there's a pattern."

A male RA stood up.

"How do we get better training?" he asked.

"I'll be working with the administration on that, and we'll have something to announce soon."

It dawned on me that this was the kind of response Dean Parker should have made. Dean Parker had been driven by ideology, whereas Dean Anderson was driven by compassion, and that made all the difference in the world. There were no further questions, so we left the auditorium, and I headed back to the dorm, where I went to Clarissa and Jocelyn's room and asked Clarissa if we could talk.

"What's up?" Clarissa asked when we got to my room, and I'd shut the door.

"Oh, just my crazy life again."

"Now what?"

"Well, after two days of deep conversation, I've concluded that Lara isn't the right girl for me."

"Have you told her?"

I nodded, "Yes. We finished that conversation right before lunch. She doesn't disagree with me."

"You're going to ask Elizaveta to marry you?"

"That is the most likely outcome."

"Something else is bugging you."

"Michelle asked me for a sleepover."

Clarissa laughed softly, "And you swore chastity!"

"And with the visions that went through my head, not to mention Lara's idea for how to properly end our relationship, I realized just how difficult the next nine or ten months are going to be."

"You were not cut out for chastity, Petrovich."

"I was doing fine," I replied. "Mainly due to the fact that there was no real temptation because everyone knew I'd given my word! Had Lara and I not basically thrown in the towel, Michelle's offer would have been interesting but not tempting."

"That's a very interesting observation, and I want to come back to it, but I think the first question is, are you going to accommodate Lara or not?"

"Accommodate? Really?"

"OK, then -- are you going to fuck her senseless?"

"I'm leaning towards doing that, yes."

"And why is that?" she asked.

"Honestly? Because I want to. I've wanted to since we were together the first time, but we agreed it would interfere with our decision-making, and I'm positive that would have been the case."

"OK. Next question -- are you going to propose to Elizaveta?"

"Very likely, but I need to talk to her dad first, and I should probably talk to Doctor Mercer about how to break the news to Angie. And I want to talk to the bishop, too."

"Only 'very likely'?"

"If I've learned one thing in the past three years, nothing is absolutely certain until it happens. And there is one important thing I need to ask you when you're done with your questions."

"Well, then, what about Michelle?" she asked with a smirk.

"Piling on!" I chuckled. "Because of the circumstances, it's extremely tempting -- fun, pretty, laid-back, and available is pretty much the Michael Loucks sweet spot. Permission to be a pig?"

"Granted!" Clarissa said with a soft laugh and a knowing smile.

"Long legs and full lips! Do I need to draw you a picture?"

"No!" Clarissa said through giggles.

"Then you understand my 'problem'."

"I do! One observation, which I think is completely obvious -- if you ask Elizaveta to marry you, then you HAVE to be chaste until May, I guess. Could you really manage? You know there will be temptation!"

"I know. If I give my word, then yes, I could."

"Which you did to Lara."

"And this is really only an issue because she released me from the commitment and offered. She actually offered yesterday, but we weren't at a point where that could happen."

"What's the question you want to ask?"

"You know me well enough to guess."

"Yes, I do, but you have to ask it," Clarissa said firmly.

"Will YOU marry me, Lissa?"

"You know the answer to that and why," she said with a soft smile.

I nodded, "I did, but I absolutely had to ask."

"I was sure you would ask before you proposed to someone else. And I was sure you knew what my answer would be. Back to the chastity issue, and I am not trying to impugn your faith, but if all it takes is a promise, why doesn't a promise to God or your priest work?"

"I've asked myself that question many times, and I think it comes down to fidelity -- cheating is, without question, the surest way to destroy a relationship. If you can't trust your partner to be faithful, how can you trust them in anything?"

"Which, in the end, was what broke down your relationship with Jocelyn -- not sexual infidelity, but hiding things from you and, from what she said, implying that everything was OK with having a family."

I nodded, "I can't tell you for sure what might have happened had she been completely honest from the beginning, but I don't think it would have led to the same kind of rupture of our relationship. That said, and not trying to say that somehow the ends justify the means, but that entire experience is what allowed me to grow. On the flip side, it led me to become promiscuous. I rationalized

from one girl to the next, each one making sense in context, and let my weakness control me."

"Well, you know my take on that, so we won't go into it, but what will Father Nicholas do?"

"I'll get a very serious talking-to, and there may be additional discipline, though Father has to balance the congregation's response to any public discipline, such as holding myself out of the Eucharist for an extended time or not serving in the altar. Not to mention what it might do to my potential relationship with Elizaveta."

"I think you might have just talked yourself out of being with Lara one last time. Well, unless you decide to start lying to your priest."

"There's a reason most young adults don't go to confession," I replied. "Even if they reject the teaching of the Church on pre-marital sex, the idea of lying in confession is so beyond the pale that it's better to stay away. Some will avoid the Eucharist, too."

"Not to foment rebellion, but how sure are you about the Bible's teachings on the matter?"

"I'd say it would be very difficult to argue anything other than the traditional view. I think, on balance, it's quite clear. Some try to limit it to visiting prostitutes, but I don't see that. First of all, the Ten Commandments reject any kind of extra-marital sex by rejecting adultery. And the entire concept of 'one flesh' makes a strong case for lifetime monogamy. That said, there is ONE exception, which is traditionally Russian but also Biblical.

"Basically, during New Testament times, so from the birth of John the Baptist to around AD80, marriage was a two-stage process, just as it still is in the Orthodox

Church. First, there is the betrothal ceremony, and later, the marriage contract was executed. You can see this in the Orthodox wedding rite, which includes both the betrothal ceremony and the actual marriage rite, called 'Crowning'. In the past, though, they were separate, and it wasn't considered a sin for the betrothed couple to cohabit, both in first-century Palestine and pre-Revolutionary Russia. Some Orthodox still do the two ceremonies."

"I remember you suggesting something like that with regard to Sasha and Yaroslav."

I nodded, "Yes, because the betrothal would be sufficient, in the minds of most in the Church, for cohabitation. Because Sasha was sixteen, there was literally nothing the State could do at that point. Well, I'm sure Family Services could cause trouble somehow, but in the end, she was above the age of consent."

"Maybe that's your solution with Elizaveta."

"Yes, because I want to go to jail! Remember, she's not sixteen until April, and the State won't care one bit about any religious ceremonies."

"Can I ask something about your confession?"

"Sure."

"What exactly did you tell Father Nicholas?"

"That I was doing my best to stay chaste. And yes, I know you're looking for a loophole for me, and I am sure I can find one in my conversation with him, but the risk is far too great."

"So then what? You're going to struggle mightily. You have, in effect, become used to regular sexual activity, and you went 'cold turkey' in July."

"I don't really have any options at this point," I replied. "Not to mention that Lara would confess, and Father Nicholas would know what happened, which would cause even MORE trouble; trouble which I might not be able to overcome and be ordained."

"He doesn't know she was with you, does he?"

"No. We never give names because each of us is responsible for our own sins. During her confession, which covered the time from when she stopped going to church, she simply called it 'experimentation' without giving any timeframe. And my own history meant I could simply confess to continuing weakness in that area. But this would be different."

"Are you truly going to be able to keep your word to Elizaveta? I'm asking because if you don't..."

"I know. I've put myself into the exact situation I tried to avoid three years ago -- where having what amounts to casual sex is, in effect, normal for me, making it even more difficult to resist."

"You realize all the current angst is caused by your upcoming ordination?"

"That's not quite accurate -- I know my behavior has been sinful."

"Yes, of course, but that's seriously exacerbated by your ordination."

"Are you trying to suggest I forego that? Just so I can get laid?"

Clarissa laughed, "I suppose that is what it appears I'm suggesting, isn't it? But that's not what I meant, really. What I meant was to ask just how important your ordination is to you? And I'm asking because then your timeline changes."

"Giving me even MORE license to sin. As the Holy Apostle Paul wrote, *'it is better to marry than to burn'*."

"Don't get me wrong, Petrovich, I'll support you in whatever you decide. And to be honest, I think you should have the betrothal ceremony and let it be known that you're engaged. That should keep the predators at bay!"

I chuckled, "I would hope so."

"You will disappoint someone tremendously."

"Who?"

"Doctor Blahnik!" Clarissa teased.

"That was never going to happen," I grinned. "An interesting fantasy, but wrong for a number of reasons."

"So you say! Anyway, what's the plan?"

"Talk to Lara, talk to Doctor Mercer, talk to Father Nicholas, talk to the bishop, talk to Viktor Kozlov, and then ask Elizaveta to marry me, assuming everything is OK at that point."

"What about a ring?"

"Traditionally, rings are exchanged during the betrothal ceremony, though as I've said, that's usually delayed and celebrated with the Crowning, or what you'd call the actual marriage ceremony. There are no vows, no exchange of rings, or any of the other usual Western traditions during the Crowning."

"Just wedding bands?"

"Yes, worn by both from the time of the betrothal ceremony. There are some non-religious traditions around asking her, as well. First, I obtain approval from her father to ask. Then, when I go to ask her, I bring a gift for her, traditionally called the «ВЫКУП НЕВЕСТЫ» (*vykup nevesty*), which translates approximately to 'bride price'. If her family accepts the gift on her behalf, and she's willing to marry me, then we make the arrangements for the actual betrothal, which would happen after liturgy on Sunday, so the rings can be on the altar."

"'Bride price'? Seriously?!"

"Tell me how that's different from bringing an engagement ring, Lissa!"

"Calling it a 'bride price', for one!"

"And how many American girls would be offended if the guy didn't show up with a suitable engagement ring? I just have far more options -- a nice necklace, bracelet, or anything, really, but jewelry is traditional. Personally, I'm happy not to feed the diamond cartel!"

Clarissa laughed, "When they advertise how much you should spend and use your monthly salary as a reference point, you KNOW it's all about extracting the maximum they can from every male on the planet! No best man or maid of honor, right?"

"Not in the Western sense. We'll have sponsors, who Elizaveta and I will pick, and they'll serve as our «свидетелей», or 'witnesses'. There's also a tradition, and I expect Elizaveta has followed it, that she'll have her ears pierced before the betrothal ceremony and, immediately after it, the sponsors will each put an earring in her ear. They'll buy those, and they signify their commitment to

supporting us. They're the couple we'll go to for advice and, if necessary, mediation."

"Interesting. I take it they're supposed to be older?"

"Preferably grandparents, but that's not strictly necessary. The point is they've had long experience in marriage and raising a family, and who we turn to for advice or help."

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"Probably the Sokolovs," I replied. "But the Zhuravlyovs would be a good choice as well."

"If you need advice on how to flirt with girls a quarter your age!" Clarissa teased.

"And yet, they're happily married and have a bunch of grandkids!"

"What about a honeymoon?"

"That's actually not an Orthodox or Russian tradition, but most here have adopted it. I think our trip to Europe will have to serve as our honeymoon."

"Complete with Sandy, Pete, Abby, and me in hostels?"

"In the guidebook we got from the travel agent when we booked our tickets, the International Youth Hostel Federation lists hostels which have private rooms. We won't be able to use those exclusively, but we'll be able to get some privacy."

"Right, because a horny twenty-two-year-old and a horny sixteen-year-old who has just discovered sex aren't going to want to fuck like bunny rabbits the entire time?"

"We'll have a couple of weeks post-graduation before we leave, given how we set it up."

"When would you have the actual marriage ceremony?"

"That's a tricky question because I have to live in the dorms until May 24th. That means May 26th, after graduation. Given our departure date of June 8th, that means almost two weeks when I have no obligations."

"Other than fucking your new wife senseless!"

"That might happen," I chuckled.

XX. A Pair Of Blessings

September 3, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I understand," Lara soothed. "I really do. You can't risk your ordination nor your relationship with Elizaveta. Father Nicholas would know, and neither of us could answer the questions he would have to ask in a way that would satisfy him."

"I'm sorry."

Lara smiled, "Probably not quite as sorry as I am! I should have played the cards somewhat differently; that said, everything we did made perfect sense at the time. May I give you your first wedding present?"

I leered and smirked, causing Lara to laugh.

"I didn't mean THAT kind of present, though, if you'll accept it..."

"Unfortunately, I can't accept that!"

"Then, instead, four nights in Paris at Hôtel Le Bristol. It's a five-star hotel on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, close to Avenue des Champs-Élysées."

"A five-star hotel has to cost a small fortune!"

"In case you hadn't noticed, I have more than sufficient resources."

"I'd feel bad because of Clarissa, Abby, Sandy, and Pete."

"Not to be a bitch, but so what? I'm giving you and Elizaveta a gift! Not to mention, I can't imagine any of them objecting, given that the trip is effectively going to be your honeymoon."

"I apologize for even voicing that concern."

Lara shook her head, "It's you. Your first thought, after objecting to how much I was going to spend, was your friends. If that's not a typical Mike Loucks response, I'm not sure what one would be. I just need to know when you'll be in Paris."

"Right now, our plan is Amsterdam, Brussels, and then Paris. We'll map it out fully soon."

"We never really talked in detail about it. Where else did you plan to go?"

"Madrid, Rome, Geneva, Vienna, Munich, West Berlin, Copenhagen, London, and then back to Amsterdam. With travel, we figure we'll have two or three days per city. We thought about Athens, but that's too far, at something like twenty hours each way from Rome. We might cut out West Berlin, too, depending on what we want to see in the other cities. The other city we could drop is Brussels."

"If you want my advice, drop Brussels and West Berlin and go to Athens."

"Why do you say that?"

"West Berlin isn't really worth the hassle of going through East Germany, and given how relations are at the moment, nobody can predict what might happen. As for Brussels, I'd say Athens is far more interesting, and it lets you visit an Orthodox country. If you wanted to do a bit of sightseeing in Brussels, you could always leave Amsterdam very early in the morning, spend eight hours in Brussels, and then continue on to Paris, which I think is a MUCH better place to

hang out. Of the cities you listed, Paris, Amsterdam, and Rome are the most interesting and fun."

"I take it you've been to all of them?"

"Yes. I can give you some ideas of what to see that might not be in your guidebook."

"Thanks. I'm glad this is amicable."

"Why wouldn't it be? If you'll pardon the crassness of this statement, we were negotiating a deal, and it didn't work out. We'll still be friends, hang out together, and go to church together. Remember what I said back in the Spring?"

"I remember."

"So, what's the next step? Elizaveta's dad?"

"No. I need to talk to Doctor Mercer about how to handle things with Angie -- should I tell her before or after? Then I need to talk to Father Nicholas and Vladyka ARKADY. Once I have their blessings, I'll talk to Viktor Nikolay'ich. If he's amenable, which I'm sure he will be, I'll pick out a pair of wedding bands and the «ВЫКУП НЕВЕСТЫ» (*vykup nevesty*), then ask Elizaveta."

Lara laughed, "You would, wouldn't you? But the 'bride price' is the tradition. Any idea what you're going to get her?"

"Probably a necklace of some kind, or possibly a bracelet."

"I'll help you pick something appropriate and in your price range."

"Thanks. I'm not exactly up on fashion and jewelry."

"I'm no expert, but I am a girl!"

I chuckled, "I had noticed!"

"I was pretty sure it was obvious even to you! I assume you're doing the traditional two rings and no diamond?"

"Correct. And happily so."

"You think De Beers has enough money?" she asked.

"More than," I chuckled. "I've seen their advertising. From what I understand, before the 1930s, almost nobody except the very wealthy gave diamond engagement rings in the West, and it never happened in Russia, except perhaps after the aristocracy developed their terrible affectation for everything French."

"When do you plan to tell everyone?"

"Clarissa knows, obviously; for the rest, once I talk to Elizaveta's dad. Nothing will change that anyone would notice before that."

"Rings on the right hand?" she asked.

"Only the first-generation Russian immigrants still wear them on their right hands," I replied. "We'll put them on the right hand for the betrothal, as is traditional, but then move them to the left when the ceremony is complete."

"Shall we go find the gang?" Lara asked.

"After a hug," I replied.

I held out my arms, and she melted into them. We held each other for about five minutes before exchanging a chaste kiss. We broke the hug and left my room in search of our friends.



September 4, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday morning, after I ran but before breakfast, I called Doctor Mercer's office and caught her before her first patient. I explained the situation, and she was quiet for a minute.

"That's a very good question. I'm not quite sure how she's going to react, but you're right that you need to tell her as soon as possible. I think, given where you are and where she is, telling her before you ask is probably the best."

"What's your best assessment of how she'll respond?" I asked.

"I honestly don't know," Doctor Mercer replied. "At times, she seems to accept the inevitability of you marrying; at other times, she seems to hold out hope that you won't."

"And this could cause, well, a relapse, I guess is the word?"

"Mike, anything could. You not calling her; you calling her; you being aloof; you being friendly; you getting engaged; you going to a monastery."

I laughed, "Not a chance of that last one!"

"So I gathered, but the point remains -- nobody knows for sure what will set her off. What I do know is that you being her friend and caring about her has helped keep her stable. And if we assume she's back to the relatively stable version of

herself that followed the French kiss, the fact you were dating and engaging in intercourse with her approval tells me she'll handle this OK."

"That's somewhat different from getting engaged."

"Yes, of course, but what I'm saying is that while the Angie who has emerged isn't able to have that kind of relationship with anyone, she was able to handle you having a serious relationship with another girl. I can't say for sure, but I do think she'll handle it OK. As I've said, everything is a risk, and I think, in this case, the bigger risk is keeping it from her."

"I don't think I can do this over the phone, especially given I can't be sure she has the proper support there with her if things go haywire."

"I think you're right. When do you have time to visit?"

"I'm going to be in Cincinnati for an interview at UC on Thursday the 20th, so maybe that will work."

The timing meant I would have the opportunity to discuss things with Father Nicholas and probably the bishop before I saw Angie, so everything would be ready for me to tell her, and then I could speak to Elizaveta's dad.

"You still plan to go to McKinley Medical School, right?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Yes, but we're interviewing at five schools to make sure we have a contingency plan in the case of a nasty, unexpected result with McKinley. We'll go wherever all three of us get in, with McKinley as our first choice."

"Ah, yes, I remember. And I think it's good that you have a reason to be in Cincinnati. That way, you can tell her you intend to get engaged, and it doesn't seem as if you made a trip specifically to do that. How are things otherwise?"

"School is fine, but things at home aren't so good. My parents are basically not talking to Liz or me at this point. I've reached out to my mom, but it hasn't helped. I guess we'll see what happens at Thanksgiving."

"How are you dealing with that?"

"OK, I guess. I knew this was going to happen; I just didn't expect it to take this long for my mom to be willing to discuss it with me."

"If you need to talk, please call or come see me. Otherwise, I'll speak to you just before your visit."

"Thanks, Doctor Mercer."

"You're welcome."

We said 'goodbye' and hung up, and I left the room to join Clarissa, Jocelyn, Sandy, Pete, Lara, Sarah, and Dona for breakfast. After breakfast, Clarissa, Sandy, and I hung out while the others went to class. Just before 10:00am, we left for our Analytical Chemistry lab. Having Clarissa and Sandy as my lab partners made things so much easier, and the same was true of our Senior project, which we were doing with Fran.

After the lab, we had lunch with some of the gang, then went back to the dorm to work on our lab report, which we completed just before dinner. All four of us did take a break mid-afternoon to schedule interviews at OSU and Indiana. For dinner, we joined the extended gang in the cafeteria to eat, and afterwards, we headed back to the dorm. I had very little homework because we'd completed our lab report earlier, so I was back in my room by 8:30pm with Clarissa. The phone rang just before 9:00pm.

"Hi, Mikey!"

"Hi, Liz! What's up?"

"We found out that the courthouse only does weddings on Tuesday afternoons at 2:00pm. Can you be at the Harding County Courthouse on December 11?"

"Yes. My lab ends at 11:30am, so I can leave then and easily be in Rutherford by 2:00pm. Do you want me to bring Jocelyn and Clarissa?"

"Yes, please!" Liz exclaimed. "Have you talked to Mom?"

"No," I replied, "but now I have a reason to call her, and maybe it'll help. But I think I'll wait a bit before I do that, if it's OK with you."

"Sure."

"Have you moved in with Paul yet?"

"No. I'll move at the end of this month. How are things with you?"

"Good. Clarissa, Sandy, and I have four interviews scheduled. We're just waiting to hear from Pittsburgh."

"Decide which girl?"

"Promise to reveal nothing to anyone? I mean, not even to Paul or Emmy?"

"Of course!"

"Is anyone anywhere they can hear you?"

"Emmy's working, and Leslie is out."

"Elizaveta."

"No way!" Liz exclaimed. "I was so sure it would be Lara!"

"Think about what a deacon's wife has to be like."

"Shit. That sucks, Mikey. Lara is awesome!"

"She and I came to the decision together, Lizzy. I'm getting more of a picture of her lifestyle, and I don't think she'd be happy. Neither does she."

"Have you heard anything from Maggie?"

"Not since Hannah and Violet tried to get her to talk to me. At this point, it's a complete non-starter. If you think about it, cutting off all contact isn't exactly a mature response to a relationship issue."

"Mom and Dad?"

"And Clarissa's parents. And the way Jocelyn's parents dealt with our relationship; well, her mom, anyway."

"Why are parents so fucked up?"

"I think, maybe, it has to do with the difficulty of seeing your kids as adults who make their own decisions, especially when you disagree with some of those decisions. If you think about it, the only real conflict I've had with Mom is when she hasn't agreed with my choices. The thing with that quack Orosco was her manipulating Mom, not a real conflict."

"But she turned Mom against you so easily!"

"She's a trained psychiatrist," I said. "Don't you think she'd understand exactly how to manipulate people?"

"Shit! You're right."

"And if you think about Jocelyn and Clarissa, it's the same thing, though Clarissa didn't really make a choice about being a lesbian. Her dad thinks she did, and that, plus his obvious prejudice, caused his reaction. You know Dad basically freaked out about Clarissa, too."

"But why can't they see us as adults?"

"After eighteen years of seeing us as kids? Think about that."

"I guess."

"Here's the strange one, though. Lara's stepdad basically treated her like an adult from the time she was little, but even HE showed his annoyance with what he thought was a bad decision."

"You?"

"Yes, but that wasn't really a factor. Her biological dad is awesome, by the way, even if he treated her more like a kid. Give me a few weeks to sort things out, then I'll talk to Mom and see what I can do. In the meantime, just do your thing and start school next Monday. Let me know how much you need for tuition and books. I'll cover it."

"Are you SURE, Mikey?"

"Positive."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then went to sit next to Clarissa.

"Parents are fun, aren't they?" she asked sarcastically.

"Tell me about it," I said with an exasperated sigh. "She's getting married on Tuesday, December 11th. She wants me to bring you and Jocelyn, and it fits our class schedule."

"Cool. I heard you say you were going to wait to talk to your mom."

"I figure I'll tell her about my betrothal and Liz's wedding date at the same time. Also, before the rest of the gang comes in, I wanted to tell you about what Doctor Mercer said this morning. When we go for our interviews at UC, I'll stop in and see Angie and break the news to her before I talk to Elizaveta's dad. Doctor Mercer thinks telling Angie when I'm there for another purpose that I plan to ask Elizaveta to marry me will be the least traumatic. I think she's right."

"You have to do that alone, Mike. Sandy and I can hang out at the Wendy's or whatever while you talk to her."

"Angie's mom needs to be around just in case Angie has a bad reaction. And Doctor Mercer will make herself available immediately if we need her."

"How do you think Angie will respond?"

"I have no idea," I replied. "But, she's basically back to where she was after our French kiss, and you know, after that, I had steady girls, and Angie knew I was sleeping with them. That gives me hope that she'll handle this reasonably well. We can't hide it from her, and once I saw her after her last meltdown, there was really no way to avoid her knowing what was happening in my life. After all, she

goes to Saint George in Loveland, and I'll absolutely serve there as a deacon at some point."

"I hadn't considered that possibility; you're right, you couldn't hide it from her."

Our private conversation had to end as several of our friends came into the room to hang out until bedtime.



September 5, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Father, can we talk after Vespers?" I asked after receiving his blessing in the altar on Wednesday evening.

"Confession? Or just a talk?"

"Just a talk, though history suggests it could end up as confession."

Father Nicholas nodded, "Quite so. Shall we vest?"

We went to the vestry, put on our liturgical garb, and prepared for the service. Just over an hour later, we went to his office. Lara and Clarissa had gone back to campus with Tasha, so I didn't have any time pressure, except for the need to complete a couple of hours of homework.

"What did you need to talk about, Subdeacon?"

"I know it's not required, but I'd like your blessing to speak to Viktor Nikolay'ich about a betrothal to Elizaveta Viktorovna."

Father Nicholas removed his glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose, shook his head, then put his glasses back on.

"Of all the things I thought you might say to me, that is probably the last one I expected. Lara came to church with you tonight, right?"

I nodded, "Yes. She and I were in Pittsburgh over the weekend, and we had some very good talks, which continued when we returned to McKinley. We agree that she's not cut out for the life of a deacon's wife."

"It does take a very special kind of young woman to marry a man with a calling, and you have two."

"Lara IS special," I replied, "but she's concerned about the intense scrutiny which comes with the role of Matushka. Tasha expressed similar concerns several years ago, long before we were permitted to actually date."

"I have to ask, given your history, if you and Lara managed to avoid temptation while you were away."

I smiled, "There was plenty of temptation, but we managed to avoid acting on it. That said, I will admit it was a very close thing, and my main reason for staying chaste was my concern for the problem it would have created for you and Vladyka, not to mention the impropriety with regard to Elizaveta."

"Public discipline would have created a scandal, but allowing you to sin freely after what you said during your confession before you started seeing Elizaveta would have damaged your soul and made a mockery of both confession and your ordination. The fact that you realized that and remained chaste is a good sign, Subdeacon. You know I had serious concerns about that aspect of your life. Had you not come to me when you did, with your commitment to resolve it,

there would have been little choice except to tell Vladyka you weren't suitable for the diaconate."

"And you didn't tell me this?"

Father Nicholas sighed, "Should I have *had* to tell you?"

"No," I replied with chagrin. "You should not."

"I knew you were aware, and it really was a test of your character to see how you handled it. You did the right thing at the eleventh hour, but as Saint John Chrysostom reminds us at Pascha, the eleventh hour is sufficient. Will Lara tell me the same story?"

"I believe what she'll say to you will be consistent with what I've told you because it's the truth."

Father Nicholas nodded, "Normally, I don't ask those kinds of specific questions, but in this case, if you confessed a transgression, it would be fairly obvious with whom you had transgressed."

"In that regard, I can confidently say there is nothing for either of us to confess. Now, if we're talking images popping into my mind, that's a whole different story."

"Do you fight them or encourage them?"

"Before I talked to you about chastity, I encouraged them; since then, I fight them."

"Which will make your struggle to avoid physical sin all that much easier. You fed the demon, if you will; now you're starving it."

I nodded, "I blamed my weakness as if it were external to me rather than a product of my own interior life."

"Something I believe you knew before you chose to begin engaging in sexual relations."

"Yes, of course."

"Back to the issue of Elizaveta Viktorovna -- are you positive?"

I smiled, "You mean because of Tasha, Angie, Katy, Kimiko, Maggie, and Lara?"

Father Nicholas laughed softly, "You read my mind!"

"You're aware of what happened with each of them from our talks and from confession. I'm positive this is the right course of action. Elizaveta has spoken with Matushka Anastasia, Matushka Natalya, and Doctor Evgeni's wife, Maria. I'll have another talk with Elizaveta about it after I speak with her father. Do you have an opinion?"

"One which I can express now that you've made your intentions clear. Before her condition overwhelmed her, I would have suggested that Angie was the perfect match for you. Given that we both know that isn't possible, I do believe Elizaveta is a very wise choice, and you have my blessing, though, as you said, you don't technically need it."

"Thank you, and I agree with you about Angie. In fact, pretty much everyone who knows Angie agrees with you about Angie. I spoke with Doctor Mercer, and when I'm in Cincinnati for my interview at UC, I'll stop by Angie's house and tell her about my betrothal to Elizaveta."

"When do you expect to talk to Viktor Nikolay'ich?"

"After I speak to Vladyka ARKADY and to Angie, which means about three weeks. Doctor Mercer felt it was better to tell Angie in advance and on a trip which was for another purpose. After all, my ordination will be announced, and Elizaveta will be called Matushka in the announcement, not to mention the likelihood of serving at Saint George at some point."

"True. What are you going to speak to His Grace about?"

"The same thing I've spoken to you about. I want to ask his blessing as well. The last thing I want to happen is to ask Elizaveta and then have there be some impediment or concern of which I'm unaware."

Father Nicholas laughed softly, "Somehow, I think the fact that it was her father who asked the Bishop to ordain you makes it quite clear there isn't going to be a problem."

"And yet, I want to ask His Grace. At a minimum, I'm showing respect for his office, though that's just the tip of the iceberg, if you will."

"And a good habit to have for the future. I believe he's in Columbus this weekend, so if you call the Chancery, you should be able to get some time with him."

"Thank you, Father."

"You're welcome. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. I want to follow the older tradition, and once I ask Elizaveta, I'd like to have the betrothal ceremony as soon as possible. The wedding would be the Sunday following my graduation, which would be May 26th."

"I hope you aren't intending to live together before the wedding. THAT part of the old tradition could prove problematic."

"I understand. We'll also need to go through the legal process to permit a sixteen-year-old to marry, similar to the situation with Sasha Antonova. There is one other issue; I assume you remember that I have a trip planned to Europe for a month, starting in June. My intent is to take Elizaveta, which is something I'll discuss with her dad."

"You'll want your ordination after that, I assume."

"I think that makes the most sense, though obviously it's up to the bishop to determine."

"When you speak to him, tell him that I'm open to any Sunday in July or August after you return, allowing for the Dormition fast. That five weeks or so you'll be gone is going to be tough, though so many people are on vacation that it won't be quite so bad."

"I'll let him know. And I think that's all."

"Good. See you on Saturday!"

I received his blessing, then headed out to my car to drive back to campus.



September 8, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Mike, did you look through the course materials from McKinley and UC?"
Clarissa asked on Saturday morning.

"Not yet. I figured I'd worry about that after we got in. Why?"

"Freshman year is 51 weeks. There's a one-week break before Sophomore year. Then, no more breaks, period. Well, that's not true -- two days for Thanksgiving and the week between Christmas and New Year's each of the first two years."

"No Summer break?!" I asked in surprise.

"No Summer break," Clarissa confirmed. "Basically, it's like Residency, minus the two-week vacation we'll get after our first year."

"I made a really bad assumption, and nobody told me about that!"

"Me, either! Sandy didn't know, but Fran did. She said she assumed we all knew about the schedule."

"How does that affect your finances?" I asked.

"Mom said they're going to send me the same amount towards tuition and the same amount of spending money, so it'll be OK. Doctor Blahnik already offered me the guest room at her house for the duration, and she's only charging me a nominal amount. I assume you're going to live in the cottage at Elizaveta's parents' house?"

"I think it would be foolish not to," I replied. "It takes about the same amount of time to get to the medical school and hospital from there as it does from Doctor Blahnik's house, and Doctor Blahnik confirmed for me that we'll be able to study there, even if I elect not to live there."

"You told her?"

"No, it was a hypothetical discussion over the Summer. I believe she still thinks Lara and I are a couple."

"I believe EVERYONE thinks that at this point, with a few exceptions. You two have done a good job of keeping things consistent."

"We never really went in for any public displays of affection, and we only spent a little bit of time together each day, so it's not a big change."

"When are you leaving?"

"In about fifteen minutes. Lara was cool with you coming along if you want."

"You'll be back in time for your lunch with the Kozlovs, right?"

"Yes. Remember, too, I'm going to Columbus after lunch."

"I remember. Sure. I'll go to the mall with you."

Twenty-five minutes later, Lara, Clarissa, and I were standing in the jewelry store at the mall, trying to decide on a proper «ВЫКУП НЕВЕСТЫ» (*vykup nevesty*) which would fit my budget. Because of the offer, Elizaveta's dad had made, I had more financial freedom than I might have in the past, despite the revelation about not being able to work between my Freshman and Sophomore years and the reduced time I'd be able to work because of my trip to Europe.

"I think your choice for the 'bride price' bracelet comes down to color," Lara said. "Given her complexion, hair, and eyes, and taking into account not being ostentatious, I think sapphire is your best bet. Rubies are nice, but red can seem a bit too 'showy' if you get my drift."

"I do," I replied. "And honestly, all of these appear to be in a reasonable price range."

"Diamonds are the ones which get outrageous even in small carat weights. My opinion is the tennis bracelet if you feel you can afford it."

"I can. I was considering that choker with the sapphire as well. It's not all that expensive."

"And it will look sexy as hell if she wore it to bed!" Lara whispered. *"Your own personal Tatiana Romanova!"*

I chuckled, "The thought had crossed my mind!"

"Of course it did, you pig!" Clarissa teased.

"If you can afford both, plus the wedding bands, then I'd do that," Lara advised. "I take it you don't know her ring size?"

"No, and there's no reasonable way to find out without giving away the secret, so to speak."

"You can pay for the bands today and come in for a fitting," the female clerk, who had been silent, said. "We have plenty of bands in stock, so I'm certain we'll be able to fit her. We can take your fitting today and set the band aside. Just plain gold?"

"Actually, one gold for me; one silver for her."

"Not both gold?"

"No. Russian tradition is gold for the husband and silver for the wife."

"And the engagement ring?"

I shook my head, "In the Russian Orthodox tradition, the wedding bands are the engagement rings worn by both the man and woman. There are no additional rings at the actual wedding."

"Interesting," the clerk replied. "When is the wedding?"

"It'll be next May," I replied. "But we'll get engaged in a couple of weeks. The jewelry I'm buying is her engagement present, which I'll give her. Then we'll come to get the rings, which we'll use in a church ceremony called a 'betrothal' where we actually get engaged."

"I know there's a Russian church outside of town, but this is the first time I've heard it done this way."

"Most people follow the Western tradition," I replied. "I'm a bit old-fashioned in that regard."

"A bit?" Lara teased.

"I'll take both the tennis bracelet and the choker," I said.

"Yes, Sir!" the clerk replied. "And let me fit you for the ring."

She took a collection of simple metal rings, which were on a chain, and tried two, with the second one being a perfect fit. She marked down the size and then showed me the gold and silver bands, which I found acceptable. She set aside a gold one in the right size and then rang up my purchase. I handed over my credit card, which I would pay in full at the end of the month, and five minutes later, we walked from the store, and I was one step closer to being engaged.

"I meant to ask -- do you wear your cassock for your betrothal and wedding ceremonies?" Clarissa asked.

I shook my head, "No. Remember, technically, it's canonically forbidden for clergy to marry. The modern practice allows readers and subdeacons to marry with express permission from the bishop granted before ordination, but out of deference to the strict canons, it's normal to wear a suit."

"And Elizaveta?"

"It's a bit more complicated because we're using the old form but not following the old folk tradition of living together after betrothal. And by the way, that's one reason why you need an ecclesiastical divorce if you break a betrothal. As for what she wears, I'll leave it up to her, but she could just wear a nice dress, or she could get a wedding dress. I'm guessing she'll get a nice dress to wear for both ceremonies, not a full-on wedding dress. But that's her call. Or maybe her grandmother's."

When we left the mall, we headed to Doctor Blahnik's house so I could stash my purchases in my room there, which was more secure than the dorm, then I dropped the girls at the campus and headed to the Kozlovs' house for lunch. The food was excellent, and afterwards, I was permitted to take Elizaveta for ice cream, our one 'unsupervised' hour together each week.

"I know we've talked about this before," I said as I pulled out of the Kozlovs' driveway. "But I want to make sure you realize that if I were to ask you to marry me, you understand that my obligations as a doctor and as a deacon will interfere with our life and will have to take precedence."

Elizaveta nodded, "Maria and Matushka Natalya both explained everything for me and were clear about how difficult it could be when their husbands were

called away from important family matters because of patients or because of obligations at church."

"And you're really OK with that?"

"Truthfully? It's difficult to say because I haven't experienced it, but I think so, yes. Or maybe it's better to say that I promise to be OK with it and not make an issue of it or be angry with you because of it. Do you know the proverb «Без труда не вытащишь и рыбку из пруда» (Bez truda ne vytyashchish i rybku iz pruda)?"

I nodded, "Everything worthwhile requires hard work'. Well, that's not literally what the words mean, but that's the idea being expressed." (Lit. "Without effort, you won't pull a fish out of a pond.")

"And really, can anyone know for sure? In the end, don't you make a promise and then keep it?"

I nodded, "Yes, that's true. We don't use vows, but the other Christians say something like 'to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy law, and this is my solemn vow.'. That is what it amounts to."

"And you can't be sure nothing bad will happen, and no challenges will arise, can you?" Elizaveta asked.

"I'd say it's the opposite -- you can be sure bad things will happen and that plenty of challenges will arise."

"Then I don't see any solution except hard work," Elizaveta said. "And in the end, not to be flip, but «Всё в руках божьих» (*Vso v rukakh bozh'ikh*)."

I nodded, "It's true that everything is in God's hands, but we never mean that in a fatalistic way because we are fellow workers together with God."

"Yes, of course!" Elizaveta declared. "We pray for God's mercy and for healing, but that doesn't mean we don't go to the doctor!"

We arrived at Verner's, and as usual, I ordered a single scoop of chocolate on a sugar cone, and Elizaveta had a single scoop of strawberry in a cup. We took our ice cream outside to sit on a bench in front of the shop.

"Mishka, do you believe what I've said to you?" Elizaveta asked. "It seems as if you have serious doubts."

"I don't think it's so much doubt as concern that you understand what you'd be committing to."

"Besides having your babies?" she teased.

"Yes, besides that!"

"Practicing making them?" she said impishly.

I chuckled, "Obviously. But there is more to marriage than that."

"I know THAT, you idiot!" she declared, sounding annoyed. "Oops, I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have said that."

I chuckled, "Oh yes, you should! I can be a real blockhead at times, and my friend Clarissa never fails to remind me of that! I'm the one who should apologize for not taking you at your word."

"I forgive you," she said. "But that will cost you FIVE kisses! That makes ten!"

"And just where would you like those kisses, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)!" I asked with a slight smirk.

Elizaveta blushed and giggled, "You have to ask a more important question first if you want that answer!"

I wasn't quite ready to ask that question, but her response held an obvious promise for the future. It, along with the rest of the conversation, made me much more comfortable with my plan of action. I'd see Angie on Tuesday and her father on Thursday for golf and a private dinner and then ask her the following Saturday. We finished our ice cream and walked back to my car where Elizaveta collected two chaste kisses before I took her back to her parents' house.

When I left the Kozlovs', I headed for Columbus for my meeting with the bishop.



September 8, 1984, Columbus, Ohio

I arrived a bit early, but Vladyka ARKADY wasn't busy, so I was shown into his office immediately. I asked for his blessing, and after Subdeacon Alexi, who had replaced Subdeacon Anthony, brought in tea, we sat in a pair of comfortable wingback chairs to talk.

"So, Mischa, what brings you here?"

"I intend to ask Viktor Nikolay'ich for his daughter's hand in marriage, and I wanted your blessing before I do that."

"You know, of course, that it's not necessary."

"I do, but I felt it appropriate given your stated intent of ordaining me to the diaconate."

"I'm assuming you've spoken to Father Nicholas, and he has expressed no concerns or reservations?"

"I have, and he gave me his blessing. I explained I was going to speak to you as well to ensure there were no impediments."

"I can't imagine there would be. Her family is faithful, and if Father Nicholas is satisfied, then I am as well. When do you intend to speak to Viktor Nikolay'ich?"

"Two weeks from Tuesday, which will be the 28th. He's teaching me to play golf and we have dinner afterwards."

"Lord, have mercy!" Vladyka exclaimed. "A game which I think generates more coarse talk than any other invented by man! Do you find it frustrating?"

"Only when I can't hit the ball straight, but I'm getting better at that. Supposedly, it's an important skill for doctors!"

"So they say," Vladyka said with a smile. "And when will you ask Elizaveta Viktorovna?"

"The following Saturday, which is the day I usually join them for lunch."

"And the wedding?"

"We'll do the betrothal and wedding ceremonies separately, with the betrothal as soon as possible and the actual wedding ceremony on May 26th."

"If I recall, you were planning a vacation in Europe before you begin medical school. Do you still plan to do that?"

"Yes. I need to ask her father and her, of course."

"She'll be your wife, Mischa!"

"Yes, and Viktor Nikolay'ich will still be her father! I don't want to spoil my relationship with him by giving offense."

"And to think you've always made a point about the «бабушки» (*babushki*) running things!"

"I did say I was going to ask Elizaveta!" I replied with a grin.

"When will you return?"

"July 18th, which is a Thursday."

He reached over to his desk, grabbed an appointment book, and flipped the pages.

"Shall we say July 28th?"

I nodded, "That's fine with me, and Father Nicholas said that any Sunday after I returned would be fine."

"Then I'll write it in. I'll call American Church Supply to approve the parish's upcoming order for your deacon's vestments."

"Thank you, Vladyka."

"I'm very happy, Mischa. Will you stay and serve at the Cathedral this evening?"

"Yes, of course."

"We'll hold off announcing your ordination date until after you marry. Would you permit me to be in attendance at your wedding?"

"Your *antimens* is on the altar, Vladyka! It's your church!"

"Yes, of course, but just as you sought my blessing, which you now have, I'm asking for yours to attend your celebration."

"We'd be very honored to have you in attendance."

He made the proper notation in his appointment book, and after we finished our tea, I assisted at Vespers, along with Protodeacon Seraphim and Subdeacon Alexi.

XXI. A Pair of Interviews

September 13, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday morning, Clarissa, Sandy, and I ate breakfast early, then returned to the dorm to dress for our interviews at McKinley Medical School. We met in the lounge, then took the elevator down to the lobby and walked to my car. We got in, and twelve minutes later, we were walking into the main building of the medical school. We found the appropriate elevator and went up to the second floor where the interviews would be held, where we were greeted by a trio of current medical students named Gene, Clara, and Leslie. They checked us in and handed us each our interview schedule.

Our interviews were broken up into several parts -- a panel interview, a review of the application packet, a psychological assessment, and a physical. Gene took me to my first interview, while Clara and Leslie took Clarissa and Sandy for their physicals. He led me down a hallway to a door, opened the door, and we walked into the room.

"Good morning, Michael," a middle-aged man in a white lab coat said after I was introduced by Gene.

"Good morning," I replied, scanning the room quickly and seeing four other white-coated individuals -- three men and one woman.

"Please have a seat," he said, pointing to a chair which faced a long table where the five doctors sat.

I sat down in the chair and took a drink of water from a glass on a table next to the chair.

"We'll have each of the panel members introduce themselves, and then we'll begin the questions."

"OK," I agreed.

"I'm Doctor Albertson, Oncology," the female doctor said.

"Doctor Robinson, Internal Medicine."

"Doctor Crane, Internal Medicine."

"Doctor Bernard, Emergency Medicine."

"And I'm Doctor Warren, Dean of the Medical School," the first man who'd spoken said.

"Good morning, Doctors Albertson, Robinson, Crane, Bernard, and Warren," I said. "Thank you for inviting me to interview."

"You're welcome," Doctor Warren said. "First, would you please tell us about yourself?"

I gave a short autobiography, starting with the incident in fourth grade which had led to my desire to be a doctor, and finished with my time at Taft. I made sure to include my jobs, playing chess, serving as RA, and my participation at church, as Doctor Evgeni had coached me.

"Very good," Doctor Warren said. "I'm curious about your decision in fourth grade. Have you ever considered any other career?"

I shook my head, "No, Doctor Warren, I haven't. From that day forward, I was absolutely sure I wanted to be a doctor, and it didn't take long to decide I wanted to work in emergency medicine."

"All from that playground incident?" Doctor Albertson said.

"Yes."

"What would you do if you failed to get into medical school?" Doctor Crane asked.

"I haven't spent much time thinking about that, but I suspect I'd return for a Master's Degree and try again in a year or two."

"Besides that incident in fourth grade," Doctor Bernard asked, "have you encountered other medical emergencies?"

"Yes. Two specific incidents since I became RA -- one near-asphyxiation from inhaling nitrous oxide and one case of ketoacidosis."

I knew those names because I'd reviewed them with Doctor Evgeni, and he'd provided the actual diagnoses.

"And how did you respond in those cases?"

"For the first one, I ensured the young woman was breathing and had a pulse, indicating that CPR was unnecessary, and then I ensured an ambulance was called. Her friend had told me they were doing what are colloquially called 'Whippets' so I knew that so long as she was breathing and her heart was beating, there wasn't much I could do besides get a trained professional to check her out."

"And the other case?"

"I wasn't sure what the problem was right away, so I made sure she was breathing, and her heart was beating, then put pillows under her feet to ensure blood flow to her brain, then covered her and had an ambulance called. I smelled her breath and remembered something from High School health class and asked her roommate if she was diabetic. It turned out she was, and she'd been drinking and not eating properly."

"How would you say your emotions were at the time?"

"I was calm and simply did what I had to do to help them, given my training is limited to First Aid and CPR."

"How long have you held your CPR card?"

"Since eighth grade."

"Why do you want to be a doctor, Michael?" Doctor Albertson asked. "I mean beyond the incident in fourth grade."

"Honestly? I believe I'm called to be a physician, and I feel it's the purpose of my life."

"Not to help your fellow man?" she asked.

"Isn't that what being a physician is about?" I asked. "It's implied in the calling, and it is certainly in the Hippocratic Oath -- '*I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing*'."

"So then it's about you?" she asked.

"Doesn't it have to start there?" I asked. "If I'm not fully committed -- and I mean one-hundred-percent committed -- to being a doctor, am I going to be of any use to anyone? If I'm not willing to dedicate my life to medicine, I probably shouldn't be in medical school, let alone work in an emergency room."

"You mentioned earlier that's your desired specialty."

"Yes."

"How do you relieve stress?" Doctor Crane asked.

I wanted to say 'screwing' because that had certainly worked with both Sandy and Sophia, but I knew that answer might land me in all kinds of hot water.

"I run every morning, listen to music, play my guitar, and go to church. Until recently, I was regularly practicing karate and achieved the rank of brown belt. When something had to give, that's what was eliminated. Recently, I started playing golf with the father of a friend, but that's not very relaxing just yet."

Three of the doctors laughed and nodded, which I felt was a good sign.

"Tell us about your study habits," Doctor Bernard requested.

"Starting the first week of Freshman year, some new friends and I began a study group. It's become more focused each year, and now it's mainly pre-med students with a couple of biochemistry majors who are planning to go research. Each year, we add some younger students to our group to guide and mentor them. We also provide tutoring for other students on our dorm floor, which comprises basically a self-selected bunch of nerds."

"How many hours do you currently study?"

"It varies, depending on what classes we're taking, but four hours a night is the norm. If we have lab reports to write, then we usually take more time to work on those."

"You're enrolled in honors science courses?" Doctor Crane asked.

"Yes, starting with Spring semester of my Freshman year."

"Does anyone who knows you well think you shouldn't be a physician?" Doctor Albertson asked.

"Right after I graduated High School, several friends told me I was way too uptight, way too serious, and way too introverted to make a good doctor. I've spent the last three years trying to loosen up, learn to joke and have fun, and be less inwardly focused while maintaining my grades."

"Have you been successful?"

"I think so. I have a good set of friends, unlike in High School where I basically hung out with the same two people for all four years."

"Are those new friends like you or not like you?"

This was a question that Doctor Hart had prepped me for, and despite my discomfort with what I would have to say, he encouraged me to make the points.

"Some are like me, but my best friend is a lesbian, and my best guy friends at Taft are a homosexual couple. I also have close Black, Hispanic, and Japanese friends."

The answer made me cringe, but it appeared to satisfy Doctor Albertson.

"You mentioned church," Doctor Robinson said, "how involved are you there?"

"Very. I'm a Subdeacon in the Russian Orthodox Church. Basically, my role is to assist the priest during the services and teach Sunday School."

"Is there anything about your faith which would interfere with being a physician?" Doctor Albertson asked.

I shook my head, "No."

"Abortion?"

"I intend to serve my OB/GYN Clerkship and Sub-Internship at a Roman Catholic hospital as a visiting student. I want to learn the procedures, but I'm personally opposed to elective abortions."

"And medically indicated ones?"

"I would be doing my patients a grave disservice to refuse any effective and necessary treatment. I would never place my religious beliefs ahead of a patient's life or health. That's why I want to learn the procedures."

"Have you traveled?" Doctor Warren asked.

I shook my head, "Not really. My friends and I are going to Europe once we graduate. We're going to backpack and train around Europe for five weeks. That will basically be our one and only vacation for the next seven years."

"Why McKinley Medical School?" Doctor Crane asked.

"Because this is my home, and I want to serve my local community. I like it here and see no reason to leave."

"Your MCAT scores are very, very good."

"This community deserves the best medical care possible."

"You intend to Match for your Residency at Moore Memorial Hospital?"

"That would be my preference, yes, though I understand how the Match works."

"You don't think training elsewhere might broaden your skillset?"

"Are you saying that Moore Memorial Hospital is not a good teaching hospital?"
I countered.

Doctor Crane laughed, "No, I'm not! And your point is well made."

"Do you have any questions for us?" Doctor Warren asked.

"What's the number one reason for *not* being accepted here?"

"I'm assuming you don't mean poor grades or a poor MCAT, which makes the answer, of necessity, a poor interview."

"And what constitutes a poor interview?"

"Assuming there are no psychological impediments, it's failing to articulate your goals and clearly state why we should accept you. Do you believe you've done that?"

"I believe my application, my references, and my answers here today have demonstrated that I am a very good candidate, and I believe, no, I know, I will make an excellent physician."

"Thank you, Michael. If you step outside, Gene will get you something to drink and show you the restroom, and you can move to the next interview session."

"Thank you, Doctor Warren; thank you, Doctors Albertson, Robinson, Crane, and Bernard."

I got up and left the room, and as Doctor Warren had said, Gene got me a drink, pointed me to the restroom, then led me to the next session room, though the door was still closed. We sat down to wait, and about ten minutes later, Clarissa came out. She smiled, and I smiled back and then went into the room.

"Hi, Michael, I'm Doctor Bennet. Please have a seat."

"Good morning, Doctor Bennet," I said and then sat down in the chair opposite him across the table.

"Michael, we're going to review your application, and I'm going to verify basically every single thing about your life."

"Suddenly, I'm glad I had a fairly boring existence up until now!"

He laughed, "This isn't a CIA or FBI background check, but we do need to go over your application and ensure it's accurate and make sure nothing important has been left out and that what has been stated is true."

"Same comment," I grinned.

"Then let's start at the beginning. Full legal name?"

"Michael Peter Loucks."

"Do you go by any other names?"

"Mikhail Petrovich Loucks, which is a Russian variation," I replied. "Plus Mike and various other forms of Mikhail in Russian."

"Do you use those in any way other than in speech?"

"No. In writing, it's always my formal given name in English."

"Parents' Names?"

"My dad is Peter William Loucks. My mom was born Rahil Mikhailovna Borodina but goes by Rachel Michelle Loucks. Her legal name is the Russian one, though she took my dad's last name when they married."

"Birthday?"

"February 2, 1963."

"Birthplace?"

"Harding County Regional Hospital in Rutherford, Ohio."

"Siblings?"

"One sister -- Elizabeth Petra Loucks. She's called Liz or Lizzy."

"Where did you go to grade school?"

"I went to school in the Harding County School district from kindergarten through High School. All the buildings are on the same campus."

"Extracurricular activities?"

"Chess club at school, choir and acolyte at church, and karate. I recently began playing guitar."

The interview continued, covering my work, my college applications, and my time at Taft. It was all pretty straightforward until a question caused me to stop short. I wondered if there was any way they knew about what had happened with Family Services and Doctor Orosco. I had to assume that everything had been removed from the files because any other option would result in the same disastrous consequences.

"Any interactions with any law enforcement of any kind?"

"I've never had so much as a speeding ticket. I have spoken to Harding County Sheriff's Deputies and McKinley Police Detectives and Officers when they were investigating things in which I wasn't involved except as either a witness or when they were questioning people in general. I also spoke to a pair of Air Force investigators who were looking for a friend who had a falling out with her dad, who's a Colonel."

"What happened there?"

"Nothing, really. They found her living with a friend and working in a law office."

"OK. Any parking tickets?"

I shook my head, "No."

"Ever use any kind of illegal drug or take any legal drug in a way that wasn't prescribed?"

"No."

"Do you drink?"

"Rarely. If I do, it's one glass of wine or a splash of liquor. My intention is to largely abstain from alcohol for the rest of my life."

"Unpaid bills?"

"No. I have no debt, and my only regular bill besides those related to education is the insurance on my Mustang."

"No student loans?"

"No. Between grants, money I've earned, money gifted to me, the RA stipend, and what my parents are able to contribute, I've paid for my undergraduate degree in full."

"How do you intend to pay for medical school?"

"The same sources of income, as well as loans to cover the rest."

"Be sure you speak to the financial aid office after you finish your last session."

"I will, thanks."

"Do you file and pay your taxes in full and on time?"

"Yes."

"Did you register for Selective Service when you turned eighteen?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever cheated on any test, engaged in plagiarism, or aided anyone in doing either of those things?"

"No."

"Have you lied to me, or is anything on any of your application materials inaccurate or meant to deceive?"

"No."

"OK. Thank you very much, Michael. Gene will take you for your physical."

"Thank you, Doctor Bennet."

I left the room and, on Gene's advice, did not use the restroom because there would be a urine test. I followed Gene to an exam room where a doctor and nurse were waiting.

"I'm Doctor Greene, and this is Nurse Lathrop," the doctor said. "We're going to do a complete physical, including blood work and a urine test. We'll need you to sign the consent form, as well as a consent form so we can get your immunization records from your family physician."

I signed the forms, stripped down to my underwear, and put on one of those silly gowns which were open in the back. The exam was similar to my usual annual exam, though there were multiple tubes of blood taken, as well as a chest

X-ray. The only questions which were asked which I'd never been asked by my family doctor were about whether I'd ever had any kind of sexually transmitted disease or engaged in 'risky' sexual behavior, which, when I asked, they euphemistically referred to homosexual activity.

When I was finished, the final session was an interview with a psychologist, which reminded me very much of my talks with Doctor Mercer and which I actually enjoyed. The last part of the interview was taking what was called a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The test was scored immediately, and I was told I was 'INTJ' and given a document to describe that personality type.

As I went out into the hallway, I scanned the document and started laughing. One of the traits was 'Personal relationships, particularly romantic ones, can be the INTJ's Achilles heel'. Truer words had NEVER been spoken about me. Another one stood out -- 'they are most comfortable working alone and tend to be less sociable than other types', something which had been true until the past year or so.

Another trait which I had experienced directly was that 'INTJs were prepared to lead if no one else was up to the task, or if they felt there was some major weakness in the current leadership'. That was absolutely the case with the dorm issue. Other traits included being pragmatic and logical, which I felt applied, though the one that said an INTJ often rejected authority based on tradition or rank. Though, as I thought about it, that was true for everything EXCEPT church.

I nodded at the last statement in the list -- 'They tend to be insightful and mentally quick; however, this mental quickness may not always be outwardly apparent to others because they keep a great deal to themselves. They are very determined people who trust their vision of the possibilities, regardless of what others think.' That described me pretty well, and I was impressed that answering a bunch of 'either/or' questions could generate such accurate results.

Gene led me to a small lounge so I could wait for Clarissa and Sandy, who both appeared about five minutes later. Once they arrived, Gene, Clara, and Leslie took us to the Financial Aid office, where we filled out short questionnaires and were given thick financial aid packets. From there, we were given a tour of the medical school and, finally, ate lunch with the students who were all in their third year. We didn't learn much new in talking to them, and they were quite clear about how difficult medical school was, which was no surprise to us.

When we finished lunch, we thanked our guides, and then the three of us left the medical school building via the elevators and walked to my car. Only when we were safely in the car on the way back to campus did we start talking about our interviews.

"How'd it go?" Clarissa asked.

"Good," I replied. "The only time I felt uncomfortable was during the review of my application when they asked about interaction with law enforcement."

"All of that stuff was removed or deleted!" Clarissa protested.

"Yes, it was, but I could just see Dean Parker trying to cause trouble by leaking information. None of it would pan out, but it WOULD cause a question."

"You don't think she did that, do you?"

I shrugged, "I doubt it because she'd end up paying for my medical school, and the university might even be on the hook because she obtained that material illegally while working for them."

"That would be sweet revenge!" Sandy said.

"I don't go for revenge," I replied. "But it would be poetic justice. Well, once all the manure was cleaned from the walls after flying through a fan! How did you guys do?"

"No problem for me," Sandy said. "That psych test was interesting, though."

"No problems," Clarissa said. "I took one of those tests in High School. My results were a bit different back then. Now I'm an INFJ."

"ESFJ," Sandy said.

"INTJ," I replied.

"According to the psychologist," Sandy said, "ESFJ is the most common personality type for pediatrics."

"Shoot," I said. "I should have asked about that. It's interesting that only Sandy is an extrovert."

"I'm not exactly extroverted!" Sandy laughed.

"It's not quite like that," Clarissa said. "Basically, you're much more comfortable with large groups, while Mike and I are more comfortable with small groups or one-on-one. For us, we have to expend energy with groups, whereas you draw energy from them."

"How do you know that?" Sandy asked.

"As I said, we did this in High School, and I actually have a book that was just published called *Please Understand Me*, which explains it really well. Basically, Mike, as an NT, has a rational temperament; you, as an SJ, have the temperament of a guardian; I, as an NF, have a more idealist temperament."

"You?" Sandy objected. "Idealist?"

"It doesn't mean the way the word is used in common speech. Let me tell you one thing the book says, and you tell me how close it is -- 'Idealists' seek mutuality in their personal relationships. Romantically, they want a soulmate with whom they can share a deep spiritual connection'. Does that sound like anyone you know?"

"Uh, yeah," Sandy replied. "You and Mike, from YOUR perspective."

"Yes, and 'Rationalists' are more interested in a 'mindmate' -- someone with whom they can have long, meaningful talks. But more importantly, they have a knowledge-seeking temperament, and they trust reason implicitly. They rely on objective observations and factual analysis in any given situation. They seek a logical argument as a basis for action. As strategists, they strive to gain as much information as possible, applying what they learn to develop long-term plans and the steps for achieving them."

"Holy shit!" Sandy declared. "That IS Mike."

"I'll let you borrow the book, if you like. Mike is exactly what I would have projected, and of course, I knew my type."

"You didn't figure out mine?"

"No. I only got the book a couple of weeks ago."

"Why?" I asked.

"Curiosity. And because the application packet said we'd have to have a psych eval."

I chuckled, "I've spent enough time with Doctor Mercer that I basically glossed over that part. I know I'm crazy, which is actually a sign of not being crazy!"

"OK, 'Yossarian'!" Clarissa laughed. "But it is true, right? If you know you have, let's call them quirks, and you're functioning normally, then you aren't crazy."

"Except he IS crazy!" Sandy declared.

"Hence the 'Catch-22'!" I grinned. "Consensus is we all did well?"

"Yes," Clarissa replied.

"Yes," Sandy agreed.

"Then it's on to Cincinnati next week!"



September 16, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Sunday morning, Lara and I met in the lounge to head to Saint Michael the Archangel for Matins and Liturgy. Our relationship hadn't really changed after our talk, with the exception we no longer had any make-out sessions. For all intents and purposes, everything appeared the same externally, and we were very good friends.

I was very lucky to have Lara, Jocelyn, Tasha, and especially Clarissa as close friends, though, of necessity, Tasha had pulled back from some of the closeness. That had been expected, but it also rang warning bells about my relationship with Clarissa, which I'd discussed with Lara when we'd decided there really

wasn't a way forward. I'd need to do some very careful balancing, as Lara had warned, to ensure I didn't wreck my relationship with Clarissa OR my marriage.

"Deep in thought, Mike?" Lara asked after I'd driven about halfway to church.

"Just thinking about how lucky I am to have you as a friend and how Tasha has withdrawn a bit."

"You knew that was coming."

"Yes, of course. And once I ask Elizaveta to marry me, then Tasha, Nikolas, Elizaveta, and I can do things as a pair of couples, which will help."

"You're worried about you and Clarissa."

"Obviously. You pointed out that she's first in my heart. I knew that, too; I was just hoping things would work out, but I know that's not possible. It's going to take some hard work on my part to find the correct balance so that I don't create problems with Elizaveta."

"May I make an observation?"

"Of course."

"I've talked to her and to her friends, and I think the biggest difficulty you'll have is that she's very submissive. It'll be very easy for you to basically have your way, no matter what."

"That almost sounds abusive," I replied.

"Because it is! And the fact that your mind went there immediately says you understand. You've suppressed your feminine side quite a bit, according to

Clarissa. I'm telling you to let it back out with regard to Elizaveta. Eventually, she'll be a «бабушка» (*babushka*) of sorts, but she's not going to be Mrs. Sokolov. If you're not careful, you'll run roughshod over her and make her very, very unhappy. And she'll just accept it. Well, things outside the house. She will be in charge of the household."

"True. Which is why I said I need to carefully balance things. And that tells me something else very important."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to need a practical, no-nonsense third party to make sure I'm not screwing things up. Care to apply for the role?"

Lara laughed, "If only it came with fringe benefits!"

"And you would sleep with a married man?"

"Who said anything about sleeping?" she teased, then became serious. "But no, of course not. That's the lowest of the low, and you know why I think that."

"I do. I really could use a sounding board, and the way our relationship has developed, I think we can do it without any risk of crossing any uncrossable lines."

"So I'm the 'safe' girl?"

"I think the way we handled things after your 'thank you' proves that point fairly conclusively, don't you?"

"Very true. We both wanted a physical relationship, but we both knew it had to take a back seat to everything else, at least for a time. And I think we both know

now that it was the right decision. Sex would have made the decision much more difficult AND might have led us to the wrong place."

"Part of my problem is I'm perhaps the least romantic person on the planet."

"The vase and daily flowers?"

"Suggested by Clarissa. The stuffed animal was my idea."

Lara laughed, "A small stuffed pussy covered in black fur!"

"Not very romantic."

"No, but it was cute, and it was the _purr_fect representation, including being stuffed!"

I laughed, "True."

"That cat will be something I keep forever to remind me of my first time with a wonderful guy. But I hate to break it to you -- I'm not much of a romantic, either. I recognize it when I'm on the receiving end, but I just don't think that way in general. Tasha is a MUCH better choice, if you can't speak to Clarissa about it."

"And that's part of my dilemma," I said. "Clarissa is a romantic at heart and gives great advice, but asking her about things with Elizaveta could create problems."

"Because of how much you'll want to share with Clarissa."

"Again, the balancing act."

"More like a tightrope fifty feet in the air with no net over a pool of hungry crocodiles."

"Yeah," I sighed.

"Did you ask her?"

"Clarissa? Yes. Right after you and I agreed about the future, I asked Lissa to marry me, knowing the answer would be 'no'. But I had to ask."

"You didn't ask me."

"Of course not! You would have said 'yes', which we both know is not the right answer!"

Lara laughed, "Aren't we the 'Odd Couple!'!"

"Yes, but who's 'Felix' and who's 'Oscar'?" I asked with a grin.

"We're both way too organized to be 'Oscar' and way too relaxed to be 'Felix'."

"I think 'relaxed' is the LAST word anyone would have used to describe me when I first arrived at Taft."

"You're pretty mellow these days, well, with the exception of your intensity with regard to class and homework."

"That used to overpower every other aspect of my life. My friends here helped me overcome that."

"All I can say is that I'll do my best to provide a sounding board for you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

We arrived at church, and Lara took her usual spot in the nave while I went through the deacon's door into the altar. Four hours later, I emerged at the end of the service, and went to the church hall for lunch and then taught Sunday School. Just as Lara and I were about to leave, Arseny, one of the college students, approached me.

"Subdeacon, do you have a moment to speak in private?"

"I do," I replied.

"I'll catch a ride with Tasha, so you don't have to rush," Lara said.

I nodded, and she hurried after Tasha while Arseny and I went to sit in the small room where the grade schoolers had Sunday School lessons.

"How can I help?" I asked.

"My grandmother has been having a difficult time since my grandfather passed away a couple of years ago, and she's been getting by just barely. She's had some unexpected expenses, and I'm concerned she won't be able to cover her utility bills and car insurance next month. Mom and Dad don't really have the means to help her, and I was wondering if the parish could help."

This was exactly the kind of situation where the parish charity fund was to be brought to bear, and I felt his request was sincere, but I also felt it best to heed Mr. Kozlov's advice and be cautious.

"If you have her bring me the utility and insurance bills, the parish will pay them from the alms given for that purpose."

He smiled broadly, "That easy?"

I nodded, "That easy. She can bring the bills next Sunday, and I'll have the parish treasurer issue checks for me to use to pay the bills. He won't know who the recipient of the assistance is. That's between you, me, and your grandmother."

"Thank you!"

"How is her health?"

"Very good, Subdeacon. Thanks for asking. We all think she'll outlive her grandkids!"

I chuckled, "That seems to be a shared belief about many of the «бабушки» (*babushki*) from the Old Country. Where is she from, if I may ask."

"Saint Petersburg. Her family left for Paris not long after the 1906 uprising. She was five, then."

"And she's still driving at 83?"

"Her eyesight is fine, and would YOU try to take away her car keys?"

"No chance! How is school going?"

"One more year at Georgia Tech, and then I'll be turned loose on an unsuspecting public! I'm flying back tonight."

"Architecture, right?"

"Yes."

"Are you staying in the area?"

"In the Midwest, I hope. I want to work for one of the big firms in Chicago, but we'll see what happens. I have about six months before I start interviewing and applying for jobs."

"Good luck!"

"Thanks. Did you get into medical school?"

"I just had my interview at McKinley, so I'll likely hear from them in the next month or so. I'm also interviewing at UC, OSU, and Indiana. I'm still waiting to hear from Pittsburgh."

"Good luck to you, too."

"Thanks. Just have your grandmother bring me the bills, please."

"I will."

We shook hands, and then I left the church, got into my car, and headed back to campus.



September 20, 1984, Cincinnati, Ohio

"Mike? Clarissa? Sandy?" a good-looking young man our age said when we walked into a diner near the University of Cincinnati.

"Larry?" I asked the guy, who looked vaguely familiar.

"Yes. I think we've met before -- a regional chess tournament during Junior Year in High School."

"We may well have," I said. "You look vaguely familiar."

"I remember seeing you, but we didn't play. Anyway, We have a booth. Drew is waiting for us."

We shook hands then followed him to the booth.

"Mike, Clarissa, Sandy -- this is Drew. Drew, my friend Dona's friends, Mike, Clarissa, and Sandy."

We all exchanged greetings and then sat down. I realized instantly that Larry and Drew were obviously a couple. I didn't have a problem with that, obviously, but I found it amusing that Dona hadn't said anything.

"Larry, Dona tells me you're applying to medical school at UC," I said.

"That's right. She mentioned you guys are most likely to go to McKinley Medical School."

We stopped talking when the waitress came and took our orders and filled or refilled everyone's coffee cups, then picked up where we left off.

"That's the plan. UC is one of our backups, along with OSU, Pittsburgh, and Indiana. What do you have in the way of backups?"

"OSU and Pittsburgh," he replied. "My mom has quite a few friends at UC, and that should get me in with no trouble, though I need to retake my MCAT because it wasn't as good as I needed it to be."

"If you don't mind my asking, what was your score?"

"52, which is about the 55th percentile. You?"

I was now embarrassed that I asked because we were going to show him up quite badly.

"75," I replied. "98th percentile."

"Jesus! You should apply to someplace like Harvard, Yale, or Stanford with those scores!"

I shook my head, "Not for me. I want to stay in Harding or Hayes County, serve my Residency there, and practice there."

He shook his head, "I'm in awe. What about you two?"

"74," Clarissa replied. "97th percentile."

"65, which is the 85th percentile," Sandy said.

"Damn, those are good scores," Larry said, shaking his head.

"Lots of study," Sandy said. "That's the key. When do you plan to retake the exam?"

"I was going to wait until December, so I had another semester under my belt. If I don't score well enough, then my third try will be in February. But I think I can get into UC for sure if I just bump the score up five points, given my mom's connections."

"Good Luck," I replied. "Drew, are you going to medical school?"

"No, I'm in my first year of nursing school at UC."

"Have you guys met a girl named Kristin Cicilioni?" Larry asked.

"I dated her for a while," I said. "How do you know her?"

"She's the granddaughter of one of my grandfather's best friends. She went to Taft to study computers."

"And she helped me pass my computer class," I replied. "Dona told me you hold a Master's ranking in chess."

"I do. Do you still play?"

"As you know, I was on the chess team in High School, but now I only play maybe once a week with a friend. I never advanced beyond an 'A' rating."

"Any tips on interviewing at UC?" Sandy asked.

"Not really," Larry replied. "My interview isn't until next week. I'm still waiting to hear from OSU and Pittsburgh."

"We're still waiting on Pittsburgh as well," Clarissa said. "I guess they're slow. And we just heard from OSU recently. What specialty are you interested in?"

"Internal medicine," Larry replied. "What about you guys?"

"Emergency medicine," I replied.

"Internal medicine," Clarissa added.

"Pediatrics," Sandy said.

"And you all want to try to Match to the same hospital?"

"Yes, if possible," Sandy said. "But that's a concern for about four years from now! Right now, we all want to get into the same medical school, along with our friend Fran. She couldn't get an interview today, or she'd be here as well."

The waitress brought our food, and everyone dug in. We didn't have a lot of time, so we ate quickly and with a minimum of small talk. When we finished, we paid the check, and then Larry and Drew walked with us to the medical school building and helped us find the place to check in for our interviews. We thanked them, exchanged phone numbers and addresses, and then they left.

We met our guides for the day, and fifteen minutes later, I was called into the interview. It was very much like the one I'd had at McKinley, and the questions were nearly the same. In fact, the entire process was nearly identical, with the exception that a different personality test was used, and I didn't get the results immediately as I had at McKinley.

After lunch with our guides and a visit to the Financial Aid office, Clarissa, Sandy, and I walked around downtown Cincinnati for a bit, then headed to Anderson Township so I could see Angie. We were a bit early, so we went to Eastgate Mall and checked out the stores. I wasn't big on shopping, but the mall was much bigger than the one in McKinley, so it was interesting to see the different stores.

When it was time to go to Angie's house, Clarissa and Sandy elected to stay at the mall, saying the food court and shops were a better choice than hanging out at Wendy's. We agreed on a plan where they would check a spot by the information desk every twenty minutes to see if I'd arrived, and then I left the mall to drive to Angie's house, where her mom greeted me and led me to the living room.

"Hi, Mike!" Angie exclaimed.

"Hi, Ang!" I replied.

We exchanged a hug that was reminiscent of the ones we'd had when our relationship had settled into the pattern of running, prayer, studying, and church.

"How was your interview?"

"It went well, I think. You know my plan is to go to McKinley, and that interview was last week and went really well."

"Good. How is Clarissa?"

"She's fine. She and Sandy are hanging out at Eastgate Mall, so you and I could have some time together. But we have no time limit, so don't worry about that. How have you been?"

"Better, I think. I'm taking one class at the junior college, and I'm working full time. The anti-depressant seems to keep things on an even keel, so long as I get enough sleep and eat right. I'm so glad they took me off the antipsychotics."

"Me, too. You're still going to church regularly?"

"Three times a week. Doctor Mercer also let me start jogging three times a week. I need to get rid of the twenty pounds I gained because of the drugs."

She had gained weight, but she didn't look bad at all. She just wasn't quite as 'compact' as she had been when I'd first met her, and she was certainly a bit out of shape, but she was still gorgeous.

"What about karate?"

"I'm not allowed to do that, and Doctor Mercer isn't sure when I will be. But it's OK. How are you doing in karate?"

"I received my brown belt, but given everything else that's going on, I had to stop going to class. I'm just too busy with school, church, trying to get into medical school, and everything else."

"I believe it. How are Robby and Lee?"

"Great. They're still going to karate and still together. Basically, the gang is intact with the addition of new students."

"Are you still playing your guitar?"

"I am. And I have a partner in crime -- a guy named José, who I practice and sing with. We've given some concerts with Milena, too."

"You should bring your guitar so I can hear you play!"

"I'll see what I can do. Maybe the next time I visit."

"Are you seeing anyone?"

I nodded, "I am. And there's a very, very good chance I'm going to ask her to marry me."

Angie nodded and sighed, "I kind of expected that would happen. Who?"

"A girl from church."

"When would you marry?"

"Probably next Summer. But I have to ask her first."

"I'm really sorry," she said quietly.

"Ang, it's not your fault. Not at all."

"That's what Doctor Mercer keeps telling me."

"I think she's right. You can't blame yourself for your condition any more than Jocelyn can blame herself for the accident."

"I just wish...never mind."

"I know," I replied, fully understanding her continuing struggle.

"It's like...is it OK to tell you?"

I wondered exactly what she was going to say, but if she shared something of her innermost feelings, maybe that could help Doctor Mercer.

"Yes, it's OK."

"I want to have a husband and kids, but..."

"I know. It's what we talked about before."

"Would you help me with something?"

"I think it depends on what it is, but I can try."

"I need to get past my mental block. I think you can help me do that."

"Angie," I said gently.

"Mike, I want you to...help me."

"I'm not sure I can," I replied.

XXII. A Pair of Questions

September 20, 1984, Milford, Ohio

"Thanks for coming here, Mike," Doctor Mercer said when I walked into her office.

"I felt I had to. Clarissa and Sandy are at Frisch's, and I'll join them when we're done. They know it could be a while."

"Have a seat," she invited.

Instead of sitting down, I went to the couch, took off my shoes, lay down, and stretched out. Doctor Mercer got up and moved to the chair, which was positioned just behind my head.

"This is different," Doctor Mercer observed.

"I know," I replied. "But I was pretty stressed, and it hasn't gone away."

"I could tell when you called me, and that's the primary reason I wanted you to come here. Angie is the secondary one, of course. Take me through what happened."

"Basically, we had a nice chat, and I told her I was very likely going to get engaged, and the wedding would be next Summer. She didn't react badly, though I could tell she was somewhat sad. Her reaction was really what I expected, at least at first -- that she regretted how things had turned out between us because of her condition, and she apologized and expressed regret. In other

words, she was the same Angie I remember from between that French kiss and what I call her first meltdown."

"And that's exactly what I would have expected. What happened next?"

"She told me she wanted to have a husband and kids, which at that point I took to be me, and said she needed help getting past her mental block. I knew what she meant and voiced a gentle objection, and that's when she asked me to help her. I told her I didn't know if I could, but she persisted. And that's when I realized what it was she wanted from me. It wasn't a marriage but a chance to be normal. And she felt making love with me would give her that chance."

"We'll come back to that in a moment, but I want to ask you about what you said about not seeing you as her husband."

"I think, once I told her I was going to get engaged, something she said she expected, it kind of put the final point on something she'd concluded -- she couldn't be my wife, even if she was past her mental block, because she was too emotionally fragile. She didn't say it, but in a sense, she realized the same thing Tasha did -- I can't provide the kind of emotional support necessary for a proper relationship with either of them because of me, but also because of their needs."

"You think she understands that?"

"Maybe not in a logical way, but I think intuitively or subconsciously, she does. Remember, she spent a lot of time with me when I was obsessed with my coursework and the difficulties of the path I'd chosen to walk. She was certainly lucid both then and now, and I think even if she can't articulate it logically, she knows -- she doesn't have the strength to be married to me, given my future. The same conclusion Tasha reached."

"So, having concluded you can't be a couple, Angie asked you to make love with her to get her past her mental block?"

I nodded, "She did."

"And you realize just how dangerous that would be?"

"Not just for her, Doc," I replied.

"Then why in Heaven's name did you tell me on the phone that you were actually considering it?!"

"I am lying here, on your couch, Doc, not in her bed," I protested weakly.

"Yes, that's true. But how could you even consider such a thing?"

"Because I love her; I have since not long after I met her. I want to help her. I want her to have the things she wants."

"Mike, you simply can't expect a casual encounter to help her get past her mental block! It could drive her to all sorts of terrible reactions and might result in her being institutionalized or contemplating suicide, and likely succeeding if intervention wasn't swift."

"First of all," I replied calmly, "making love with Angie would be anything but casual. And that's part of my problem, assuming we set aside the whole concern about sinful behavior, which is its own thicket. Second, what if it worked? What IF Angie could have some kind of normal life with a husband and kids? What IF this got her past the mental block to the point where she was cured?"

"What if she ends up permanently committed to a psychiatric facility or on a cold steel table in a morgue?"

"I know," I replied. "As I said, there's a reason I'm lying here and not with her."

"I counseled a young woman who had something of a similar relationship. The facts are different, but the basic concept is similar -- she had a friend who was helping her recover from a traumatic experience, which made intimacy very difficult. She convinced him to do what Angie asked you to do, and it backfired badly. Not in the sense of a mental breakdown, but what was supposed to be a single encounter led to her falling in love and creating all sorts of complications in both their lives. She's having serious trouble with having ANY relationship with anyone but him, and he's basically involved with someone else. Sound familiar?"

"You think Angie would decide she wants to marry me?"

"I think we both know she does, despite what you said earlier. I do agree with you that given everything you've told me about your future, you could not care for a wife who had a condition similar to Angie's."

"But if it were cured..."

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

"Can we talk about this idea in a general way?"

"Sure."

"This sounds like one of those proverbial cases of the 'cure is worse than the disease' because you think the risks associated with the cure are too great."

"Yes, and you'll encounter those kinds of situations in your career where doing nothing is actually the best choice. I think oncology provides some very

instructive cases -- chemotherapy and radiation are brutal on the body, and you have to evaluate if it's better for the patient to have a good six months or a terrible three years, or whatever. Those decisions aren't easy."

"But isn't that up to the patient and their family to evaluate the options and determine what's best for them?"

"Yes, but taking a step away from oncology, there will be cases where the patient can live with the issue and surgery, or whatever, is risky. Would, for example, a 50-50 chance of a negative outcome be worth it if, whatever the disease was, happened to be merely slightly debilitating?"

"I guess it would depend on the circumstances. An athlete might take that 50-50 shot if doing nothing limited their career. But again, that's up to them to decide, with input from the physicians and family. In this case, Angie doesn't see herself as complete and believes a future where she is married and has kids is worth the risk."

"I'm not sure she's evaluating the risk properly, nor do I think you are."

"There are no guarantees in life, Doc. Jocelyn's accident taught me that lesson in a pretty harsh way. Even if making love got Angie past the mental block, there are no guarantees she'd have a successful marriage or be a good mom. But isn't that true about me, too? And anyone, for that matter? There are no guarantees of a happy marriage or of kids, no matter what your intentions might be."

"All that is true, but Angie is stable and in a place where she can thrive and be successful."

"And be depressed because she can't teach or marry or have children."

"You're seriously considering her request?"

"I'd be a terrible friend if I wasn't considering it," I replied. "But taking the request seriously doesn't mean I'm going to do it! I have my OWN obstacles, which basically preclude me from doing it. If I made love with Angie, I'd be giving up Elizaveta and my ordination, and despite what Angie said, I'd be locking myself into a relationship with her, one which would be fraught with all sorts of risks because of my limited ability to provide strong emotional support for the next six or seven years."

"Thank heaven for small favors," Doctor Mercer said.

"I also didn't say I wasn't going to do it," I said quietly. "I love her, Doctor Mercer. And THAT is the ultimate source of the problem, if you will, at least from my perspective. You don't know this, but the people closest to me all say Angie is the one who should have been my wife and would have been except for her condition. And I agree with them. I was ready to commit to her during Freshman year, even if it meant four years of chastity before we could marry."

"Your heart and mind are in serious conflict."

"And my soul, too. Or better, what we call the «νοῦς» (*nous*). In effect, it's an admission that pure reason is insufficient and that there will always be mysteries which escape analysis and which really can't be expressed. It's the unknowable depth of a thing which constitutes its true, indefinable essence and reflects God as the source of its existence. We only understand these things by faith and intuitive truth -- by the 'eyes of the soul', or the «νοῦς» (*nous*). This is the true center of a person and is true spiritual knowledge."

"Heart, mind, and soul seem almost Trinitarian," she observed.

"Yes, and the «νοῦς» (*nous*) is the example of God's energies and essence working together in me."

"So what do these three, in conflict, tell you to do?"

"My heart says make love to Angie and try to build a relationship with her. My mind says that's nuts, if you'll pardon the expression. My «νοῦς» (*nous*) says to heed my calling. The problem is, I have three callings -- as a physician, as a clergyman, and as a husband and father."

"I think you'll find your resolution there, which actually doesn't surprise me at all."

"Angie can't fulfill my needs, and I can't fulfill hers, if I'm true to all three of my callings."

"Can the young woman you're going to ask to marry you fulfill them? And can you fulfill her needs while heeding those callings?"

"Yes."

"Then why the struggle?"

"Because I'm human! And I'm weak! And I let my desires control me! God gave me Free Will, and I have a great propensity to abuse it!"

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "Sorry, I didn't mean to laugh, but your self-assessments are accurate and the way you express them is amusing."

"Trust me, Doc, I know my weaknesses. I am extremely susceptible to offers of physical intimacy from sexy redheads with green eyes and great bodies! Even more so if I happen to be in love with them!"

Doctor Mercer laughed again, "I do believe that is the common condition of straight college-age males everywhere!"

"And lesbians," I chuckled. "They seem to like redheads with green eyes as well!"

"I suspect you're right. But sexual attraction is not sufficient to take the kinds of risks you're talking about. And I'm not sure love is, either."

"Don't you think Angie deserves the chance to be truly happy? To have what her heart desires the most?"

"Yes, of course! But at what price? And at what risk? Do you really think she's in a state to make that kind of decision?"

"Am I? Are you?"

"You know, you're getting pretty good at that rhetorical method."

"As I've said, blame my mom; she taught me."

"But rhetoric is a teaching method, NOT a way to solve problems, per se. You can make a good logical argument and still be wrong. You can ask all the right questions and come up with the wrong answers. Marx did a pretty good analysis of the problems of capitalism, but I daresay you disagree with his proposed solutions."

"You could dare to say that," I replied.

"You remind me VERY much of another patient, and all I can say is that I'm glad your decision-making is better."

"Trying to flatter me into the result you want?" I asked.

"Flattery, rhetoric, beatings with a baseball bat or tire iron; whatever works!"

"Fair enough, given how blockheaded I can be at times. But you understand my true concern here is for the healing of Angie's soul and her salvation. I know that sounds odd, especially given that we're talking about sex, but in the end, the only question I can really ask is what is the best for Angie's salvation."

"I swear, if you say that you need to have sex with her to save her soul, I AM going to brain you!"

"It wouldn't be the physical joining of bodies, but the joining of souls -- truly becoming 'one flesh'."

Doctor Mercer sighed, "What do you intend to do?"

"Go back to school, talk it over with my closest confidante, and then ask Elizaveta to marry me a week from Saturday."

"I have to say you are a very interesting study."

"How so?"

"Because you just spent fifteen minutes trying to argue me into agreeing with you."

"Did I?" I asked. "Or was I arguing with myself and using you as the foil, so to speak?"

"I don't see that very often in patients."

"Is that what I am? A patient?"

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "I specifically told you that you weren't, didn't I?"

"Yes. Insofar as is possible, given my lack of training, we're collaborating on helping Angie. We just had a debate about the best course of treatment. You won."

"I'm not sure 'win' is the right way to describe it."

"Your position prevailed because, in the end, it's the one that provides for a relatively good outcome with minimal risk and, given the range of potential outcomes, is the one that is in Angie's overall best interest, even if it's not perfect."

"And that's your lesson for the future, Mike."

"Yes, but the perfect is NOT the enemy of the good; only Satan would suggest it is. We strive for perfection, even if we can't achieve it, but we have to strive; we can't use lack of perfection for indecision or non-action. I would love to find a course of action which resolved all of Angie's troubles with an acceptable level of risk, and maybe someday we will. But the solution she proposed today certainly isn't it."

"I was reasonably certain you were going to leave here with the intention of doing what she asked."

"That's because there was a real chance that was what was going to happen, despite what it might have cost me."

"You wouldn't be the first or last person to do something that wasn't in your best interest in order to help someone. BUT, you have to be sure the price you pay is

worth the result you hope to obtain, and, if you're honest with yourself, with the cost of failure."

"True."

"What are you planning in the way of pre-marital counseling?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," I replied. "At least on that topic."

"I want to offer my services. Bring her to see me if that will work for you. I promise no attempts to persuade her to call things off. Your student health insurance should cover part of the counseling, and we'll figure out something reasonable for the remainder."

"It covers pre-marital counseling?"

"It covers relationship and adjustment counseling, and I daresay nobody will argue with me on the need for a pre-med student to have counseling."

"You were just LOOKING for a way to turn me into a patient," I teased.

"You did lie down on my couch!"

"True."

"How's your stress level?"

"Better, though my usual form of stress relief isn't available for another eight months!"

"How are you doing in that regard? And no snarky responses, please."

"There has been some temptation, but only because of a specific set of circumstances."

"Could those arise again?"

"I don't see how."

"Angie?"

"No. It was because of Lara. We agreed not to sleep together until we decided our future, and she asked me not to sleep with anyone else if I wasn't sleeping with her. She asked me to sleep with her over Labor Day weekend, and I turned her down because we weren't ready for that. When we concluded we weren't going to marry, she asked to end our relationship the way we'd begun it. Before I decided what to do, another young woman offered what she called a 'sleepover', which really tempted me. But in the end, the fact that I was also seeing Elizaveta and had told my priest I was acting chastely, I said 'no' to Lara."

"*Thank God,*" Doctor Mercer said under her breath.

I chuckled, "I'm guessing you have at least one patient who would have taken both women up on their offers?"

"You could say that. You're a bit more self-controlled."

"Only a bit," I chuckled. "I've been a bit more promiscuous than I might have let on."

"And how do you feel about that?"

"It was a result of flawed thinking -- that once I'd had one casual relationship, it didn't matter. I was wrong."

"Do you feel guilty?"

"I'm neither Roman Catholic nor Jewish," I grinned. "So, no."

"Smart aleck!" Doctor Mercer said with a laugh.

"I think the best thing to say is that I feel regret for my inability to remain chaste, but know that God forgives my transgressions, so as the prayer the priest says after confession, I 'have no further care for the sins which I have committed'."

"But you do, obviously?"

"In the sense that I know I failed to live up to perfection, yes, but not in the sense that I'm beating myself up for it."

"I think you'll find that your experience isn't all that different from other young adults who go away to college, even religious ones."

"Oh, I know," I replied. "My priest made that point when I first confessed fornication. But that's no excuse."

"No, it's not, but it is representative of the human condition. I believe you told me that the older ladies in the church had a solution for that."

"And YOU told me you disagreed with it!"

"In most instances, yes."

"Elizaveta turns sixteen in April," I said. "Are you sure you're the right person for pre-marital counseling?"

"She's fifteen?!" Doctor Mercer asked, sounding shocked.

"If she's going to be sixteen in April, it does follow that she's fifteen."

"Mike, don't be flip, please. She is VERY young."

"Yes, she is, but as was pointed out by several people, when I'm sixty, she'll be fifty-four."

"Sophistry, Mike."

"Do you think it's possible for someone to be mature enough to make this decision at fifteen?"

"Possible? Yes. But even if she's mature enough, the lack of life experience presents a host of potential problems."

"This is what she wants, Doctor Mercer. She approached me, made her case, and I began by having dinner with her dad, and then having a meal at her house each week. I had my concerns at first, but I'm certain I meet all her requirements just as she meets all of mine. This is, in effect, an arranged marriage, even though we more or less arranged it ourselves. Her parents, grandparents, the ladies in the church, my priest, and my bishop have all given their blessing."

"Which is irrelevant if she's not truly ready to make the kind of commitment you're asking her to make."

"That's backwards, Doc," I said, sitting up. "She's asking ME to make the commitment. She did her due diligence, if you will, by talking to a priest's wife, a deacon's wife, a doctor's wife, and her godmother. And she did that before she approached me with the idea."

"If you dated for another three years, I'd be a lot more comfortable with this situation."

"Which would delay my ordination significantly."

"And you'll let that force your hand such that you'll ask a fifteen-year-old girl to marry you?"

"At the risk of you saying it's sophistry, SHE asked ME. I've considered everything, and I believe this is the best course of action. Will you do the pre-marital counseling?"

"After this discussion, you want me to?"

"Who better to help us identify the areas where we need to focus our attention to ensure a successful lifetime together?"

"This is what your relationship with Clarissa is like, isn't it?"

"Very much so. She challenges me, makes me think, but supports me when I make up my mind what to do, even if she disagrees. I asked her to marry me, by the way."

"You what?!" Doctor Mercer gasped.

"I knew the answer before I asked, but I had to ask. And she wanted me to ask."

"You are a very odd duck, Mike! I think, at this point, I'll let you go see your friends. Call me to set up your first session when you're ready."

"I will. Thanks, Doctor Mercer."

"You're welcome."

I put my shoes on and left her office. I got into my Mustang and headed to Frisch's on Route 50, just east of Five Corners. I found Clarissa and Sandy sitting in a booth and went to sit with them.

"How did it go?" Clarissa asked.

I couldn't answer before the waitress came to get my drink order, and we all placed our food orders as well.

"I can't do it," I replied.

"She talked you out of it?"

"I talked me out of it," I replied. "If I did as Angie asked, I'd want to marry her, and I couldn't provide her with the kind of support she'd need without giving up on medical school. Getting past her mental block wouldn't necessarily mean her condition was resolved. And if I didn't decide to marry her, it would still be the end of my ordination and the end of my relationship with Elizaveta."

"Wait!" Sandy exclaimed. "What about Lara?"

"Please keep this completely quiet," I said. "But Lara and I decided to call it off over Labor Day weekend. One of the reasons I wanted to see Angie today was to tell her I was going to ask Elizaveta to marry me."

"Which explains Angie's request," Sandy observed.

"No, she would have made it anyway," I said. "Maybe what I said advanced the timing, but she was eventually going to ask."

"So what are you going to tell Angie?" Clarissa asked.

"The truth. Doctor Mercer will talk to her first, and I'll call her in a few weeks once Doctor Mercer is satisfied. I'm positive Angie won't melt down over this."

"How can you be sure?" Sandy asked.

"There was a fundamental difference in her demeanor from when she made what amounted to a demand about a year ago."

"I'm curious," Sandy continued, "but what would you give up for Angie?"

"Everything except the one thing which would be necessary to have any chance of success."

"Being a doctor, like you said."

"Correct," I agreed.

"Petrovich, before you take the next step, are you SURE about Elizaveta?"

I nodded, "I am."

"Will you do what I asked you? I realize it's a long shot, but I don't want to take it completely off the table."

"Yes," I replied. "I will."

We'd actually made the appointments; I just hadn't decided what to do. Every day at lunch for the last two weeks, I'd donated sperm at Moore Memorial Hospital, which would provide a sufficient volume for likely success seven or

eight years down the road. Her request now was to have them keep the sperm rather than destroy it.

"What?" Sandy asked.

"We have to keep this one to ourselves," I said. "Sorry."

Sandy smirked, "It's not about screwing because you guys already DID that!"

"No comment," I replied.

"Uh-huh."

"It's OK, Petrovich. She's going to be just as close to us as I think Dale was to you and Jocelyn. Yes, Mike and I experimented a few times."

"Not to be crude..." Sandy said.

"I had orgasms, but I'm positive I like girls, and I want to have a female life partner."

"I kind of figured that was what was going to happen. This other thing, then?"

Clarissa shook her head, "We have to keep that to ourselves. It's the one secret we can't divulge."

"OK. Sorry, I pressed. How does this affect our trip to Europe?"

"I don't think it will," I replied. "Except that Elizaveta will come with us."

"A honeymoon with four friends?"

I chuckled, "We'll have a couple of weeks together between the wedding and the trip."

"So Mike can fuck his nubile young bride senseless!" Clarissa teased.

Sandy and I both laughed.

"Exactly," I agreed.



September 25, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday afternoon, I met Viktor Kozlov at the McKinley Country Club and given that the course wasn't crowded and I'd improved somewhat, we managed to play eighteen holes. When we finished, we changed shoes and headed to the dining room for dinner. We had a nice meal with good conversation, and when the waiter brought coffee, it was time to act.

"Viktor Nikolay'ich," I said, "I would like your blessing to ask Elizaveta to marry me."

He laughed heartily, "I would not live two minutes if I were to say 'no'! Of course, I give my blessing! When do you intend to ask her?"

"At lunch on Saturday. I have the «ВЫКУП НЕВЕСТЫ» (*vykup nevesty*), and if I can arrange it, I'd like to take her to get the wedding bands after lunch on Saturday so we can have a betrothal ceremony on Sunday following liturgy."

"A man of action! And I am not surprised you followed the old tradition of the 'bride price'."

"Do you think I'd live two minutes if I wasn't a man of action?" I asked with a grin.

He laughed heartily again, "And the wedding?"

"The Sunday following graduation," I replied. "That's the 26th of May. It's after Elizaveta's sixteenth birthday and allows sufficient time for the writ from the court, which we'll need."

"That will be no problem. I have several very good lawyers. Why wait until May?"

"I don't want to leave my RA position before the end of the semester. I gave my word, and I believe I should keep it."

He nodded, "Quite so. And your honeymoon plans?"

"I have a trip to Europe planned with my friends. We're supposed to leave on June 8th. I'd like your permission to take her with me."

"She'll be your wife, Mischa! That's up to you!"

"And she'll still be your daughter, Vitya," I replied with a smile. "It's a matter of respect."

"I understand, and yes, of course, I give my blessing, though I need to ask about your travel plans."

"Train and backpack, visiting Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid, Rome, Athens, Vienna, Geneva, Munich, Copenhagen, and London. Mostly, we'll stay at youth hostels, and a friend has offered four nights in a luxury hotel in Paris."

"Who would be on this trip with you?"

"My friends Sandy, Pete, Clarissa, and Abby. I believe you've met Clarissa at church, and Sandy has been to church at Pascha twice."

"I remember Clarissa, yes. She's a sweet girl. Is she thinking of converting?"

"That's between her and God," I replied.

"You're wise not to push; just allow the Holy Spirit to work on her heart. I'm trusting you with my daughter's life, Mischa."

"I understand."

"I need to tell Yulia about this before Saturday, you understand."

"I do."

"Nothing will be said to Elizaveta, though I expect Yulia will tell her mother and my mother."

"Trying to prevent «бабушки» (*babushki*) from doing anything is a hopeless effort which can only lead to great sadness on our part!"

"You're very wise for a young man, Mischa!"

"I have a strong sense of self-preservation!"

"Indeed. Do you object to me arranging for the banquet after your wedding at the Country Club?"

"I don't believe I'm the one from whom you need to seek approval."

He laughed heartily again, "I'll speak to my wife and her mother."

"Vladyka ARKADY will be in attendance," I said.

"He is aware?"

"I asked his blessing before I spoke to you."

"That will change things a bit, as we'll need to make appropriate arrangements for him. But, there is plenty of time, so once the betrothal is complete, I can speak with him."

"He also proposed July 28th as a date for my ordination."

"Then we must arrange a banquet for that as well. There is a Parish Council election in August, so I may not be Council President after that, but as the date is before that, I can get everything in order. Actually, you'll be a member of the Parish Council once you're ordained."

"That's one thing I'm not looking forward to; I hate politics of any kind."

"Father Deacon Grigory didn't like them very much either, so you'll be following in his footsteps in that regard as well. Is there anything else you need from me?"

"Not at the moment," I replied.

"You are, of course, welcome at the house any time, and once you're betrothed, you are free to spend as much time with Elizaveta as you wish, and it is conducive to both of you maintaining very good grades."

"Are we playing golf again next week?" I asked.

"Probably not, because the weather is starting to turn. The temperature is projected in the 40°s, which is too cold to play. Let's plan to have dinner together."

"Of course."

We finished our coffee, shook hands, then I headed back to campus to join the study group.



September 27, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Loucks residence," my mom said when she answered the phone.

"It's Mike," I said.

"Hi, Mike. How are you?"

"Better if we could solve this problem," I replied. "But I didn't call to argue. Liz is getting married at the Harding County Courthouse on December 11th at 2:00pm. She'd like you and Dad to be there. In addition, I'm going to ask Elizaveta Kozlova to marry me on Saturday, with the betrothal to follow on Sunday. Please keep that to yourself until Saturday at Vespers. The wedding will be on May 26th, and then my ordination will be on July 28th. I'd like you to be at those ceremonies, but remember, Paul and Liz will be invited."

"I'm not even sure what to say to all of that."

"If we'd been talking, you would have known each of those things when they were decided," I said flatly. "You could have called; you didn't."

"I'm not sure what you want me to say? That it's OK for Liz to be with that man? The one who abused her?"

"That's not what happened according to Liz," I replied. "And she's the only one who is in a position to know. I've spent time with Paul, and while I have serious concerns about his past behavior with regard to his ex-wife and his son, I also believe he truly loves Liz. I believe in repentance and forgiveness. He paid the price for his transgressions, and now he's trying to put his life back together."

"I just don't get how you can so cavalierly dismiss what happened! She was fourteen, Mike! He was twenty-four and married! He had a kid!"

"And those last two things are why I had a serious problem with his behavior. But his wife divorced him and took his son away. He doesn't even know where they are. He spent over two years in prison, and he's on parole. But here's the thing -- Liz loves him; she loved him four years ago, and she loves him now. Whatever you think of what he did in the past, I believe he's a good man."

"You can't be serious!"

"I suppose the 'Good Thief' is in Hell in your world?"

"That's different!"

"Because he was crucified next to Jesus? Well, Paul is bearing his own cross. I am NOT saying I trust him completely, either. I made him promise to write out the address of the county morgue and keep it with him so he could save us all the trouble by driving himself there if he ever even thought about hurting Liz."

Mom laughed softly, which I took as a good sign.

"But you just said he's a good man!"

I chuckled, "I did. But I'm sure you remember the Russian proverb your dad likes so much -- «Доверяй, но проверяй» (*Doveruyai, no proveryai*)." ("Trust, but verify")

"It's not that simple, Mike!"

"Isn't it? Trust him, but watch him to make sure he treats Liz properly? He is, you know. He's working full-time, they're dating, and according to Emmy, he's treating Liz like a princess."

"Your father can barely stand the mention of your sister's name without losing his cool."

"And is that sufficient reason to skip my betrothal ceremony, wedding, and ordination? Because they're going to be there. I'm not choosing between my parents and my sister. All of you are invited. It's up to Dad to choose. When I hang up, I'm going to call Liz and then «Дедушка» (*dedushka*), so they can be at Saint Michael on Sunday." ("Grandfather")

"You know it's not that simple, and you know it's not all on your dad and me."

"Do I?" I asked. "You're saying I had to decide back in the Spring to reject Liz in favor of what you and Dad wanted? That's YOU making the decision, not me. I love Liz, and nothing is going to change that. I love you and Dad, and nothing is going to change that, either. I fail to see how your objection to a decision Liz made forces my hand. And remember, I didn't give my approval; I agreed to support her. Those are two separate things. There really is only one question -- do you want this family torn apart?"

"Liz did that with her decision!" Mom declared.

"No, she didn't," I replied firmly. "She decided to be with the man she loved, and you and Dad decided to tear apart the family over that decision. We can go around and around on this until Christ comes for the Church, whenever that might be, but I'm not going to stop loving and supporting Liz. And on that note, I'm paying for her classes and books."

"You don't have the resources to do that, Mike!"

"Sure I do. I'd rather go further into debt and put off buying the BMW or Mercedes for a couple of years than see Liz suffer because Dad had a fit of pique over her choice of husband."

Which wouldn't happen because Viktor Kozlov had committed to ensuring Elizaveta and I had sufficient resources until I was in a position to actually support our family seven years in the future.

"Now you're just trying to bait me," Mom said flatly.

"I'm obviously not getting through to you. Barring Elizaveta turning me down, which is about as likely as me becoming Muslim, the betrothal will be after Liturgy on Sunday. Attend or don't; I can't force you to do it. I want you there, but in the end, it's up to you. Now I'm going to hang up and call Liz. Bye, Mom."

"Goodbye, Mike," she replied flatly.

I hung up, sat down in the chair, and put my head on my desk. A few seconds later, I felt soft hands massaging my neck.

"Thanks, Lissa," I said.

"You looked pretty tense, and from the sound of it, it seems like your parents are about where my dad is."

"Basically. I'm caught in the middle because I love my little sister. But now I'm sounding like a broken record."

"Think they'll show up on Sunday?"

"I have no clue," I sighed. "But let me call Liz and my grandfather."

"It's going to leak," Clarissa said.

I laughed, "You have no idea."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just say I wish you could be there on Saturday, but you'll have to settle for the 'play-by-play' afterwards."

"What am I missing?"

"Being Russian!"

I decided to reverse the order of the calls, so I lifted my head and picked up the phone to call my grandfather. I gave him the same dates I'd given my parents, and he promised that he and my grandmother would be at Saint Michael the Archangel on Sunday. I thanked him, then called Liz.

"Cool!" she gushed when I told her the details. "I knew you'd find a way to get us to come to church!"

I chuckled, "As if I'd get married anywhere else? You have to be married in the temple for it to be an Orthodox wedding!"

"I know. We'll be there. We won't be able to stay long afterwards because Paul will need to get some sleep before he starts work on Sunday night."

"I understand. I talked to Mom. Dad's still being impossible about Paul, and she's only slightly better."

"Think they'll show up?"

"I think Mom is going to have a serious problem with her dad if she doesn't."

"Grandpa will be royally pissed!"

"Yes, he will," I agreed. "And it won't be you or me with whom he's upset."

"We'll see you on Sunday, Mikey!"

"I'm looking forward to it!"

We hung up, and I went to sit with Clarissa on the couch to relax for about twenty minutes before study group.



September 29, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday, I went to Doctor Blahnik's house to get the jewelry which was to be the «ВЫКУП НЕВЕСТЫ» (*vykup nevesty*), put one box in each pocket of my sport coat, then headed to the Kozlov's house. I was fully expecting the usual Russian tradition, especially given I'd used those words to describe the engagement gift. I

was somewhat surprised at how relaxed I was, and that made me certain I had made the correct decision.

When I arrived at the house, I parked in an empty spot next to the garage, then walked to the front door, where I was greeted by Viktor Kozlov. We shook hands, then he gave me a traditional Russian greeting of a hug and kisses on the cheeks.

"Come in, Mischa!" he said.

I followed him into the house and into the great room where his wife and all four of Elizaveta's grandparents were waiting. The absence of both Elizaveta and Gennady, her brother, told me everything I needed to know, and I was certainly game to play along with the tradition.

"Viktor Nikolay'ich," I said, "I'm here to ask for Elizaveta's hand in marriage. I've brought the necessary gift."

"We shall see," Elizaveta's maternal grandmother, Yekaterina, said suspiciously.

I took my cue and took the box with the choker from my suit coat. I handed it to her, and she opened it, clicking her tongue in obvious disapproval. It was all play-acting, and I knew what the next act in the play would be. She and Viktor's mother, Tatyana, left the room. Two minutes later, they were back with my 'intended' in a white dress and a veil. I barely managed to suppress a smirk and laughter when the veil was lifted to reveal Gennady, part of the gag for an insufficient «ВЫКУП НЕВЕСТЫ» (*vykup nevesty*).

"Does your 'bride' meet with your approval?" Yekaterina asked. "Or would you perhaps elect to provide a better «ВЫКУП НЕВЕСТЫ» (*vykup nevesty*)?"

I frowned and pretended to contemplate, then removed the box with the tennis bracelet from my pocket and handed it to her. She opened it, showed it to Tatyana, and they whispered to each other while Gennady and I tried to avoid laughing. The two grandmothers left and, a moment later, returned with a similarly dressed Elizaveta.

"Perhaps this one is more to your liking?" Yekaterina inquired.

"She is!" I replied happily. "Elizaveta Viktorovna, will you marry me?"

XXIII. A Pair of Rings

September 29, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Yes!" Elizaveta squealed.

Everyone clapped, and the grandmothers put the choker and bracelet on Elizaveta, who was impatiently waiting to come to me. Just before she did, Gennady hurried over, winked, and we exchanged a Russian greeting, causing everyone but Elizaveta to laugh while she simply rolled her eyes. Once Gennady moved away, Elizaveta quickly came to me and we hugged tightly, then Elizaveta turned to her maternal grandmother.

"Grandmother, may I have a proper kiss?"

"You aren't betrothed!" Yekaterina replied with a twinkle in her eye.

"«Бабушка» (*babushka*)!" Elizaveta protested in a voice which was very close to whining. ("Grandma")

"Tomorrow, when the rings are on your fingers, you may have what you call a 'proper' kiss!"

Elizaveta frowned and glowered but accepted a chaste kiss.

"You're a good sport," Gennady said. "I hope you don't mind if I remove this get-up and put on some normal clothes!"

"What, no pictures to send back to Harvard?" I teased.

"My friends would love it, but I think they'd post them all over campus!"

"Mine sure would," I chuckled. "Please change. And you, too, «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*)," I said. "Save the white dress for tomorrow so you don't spill on it at lunch." ("Bunny Rabbit")

"Yes, husband," she said with a wink.

"Not yet!" Yekaterina commanded firmly.

Elizaveta rolled her eyes, winked again, and then followed her brother upstairs to change.

"Do you have the rings, Mikhail?" Yekaterina asked.

I shook my head, "They're paid for, but they need to measure Elizaveta's finger. I'll take her to the jewelry store after lunch, then bring the rings back here for you to give to Father to put on the altar tonight at Vespers."

"Vitya tells me you have a wedding date and an ordination date approved by Vladyka ARKADY," Yekaterina said.

I nodded, "Yes. Please make whatever arrangements you feel appropriate. Vladyka will attend our wedding."

"Good," Yekaterina replied. "I know it's some time until it happens, but where do you plan to spend your wedding night?"

"In the cottage," I replied.

"OK. I will make all the arrangements."

"Thank you."

"Mischa," Viktor said, "let's go to my study and have a glass of vodka with Elizaveta's grandfathers."

"Of course," I agreed.

Viktor, Elizaveta's grandfathers -- Nikolay and Valentin -- and I went into his study, where he removed a bottle of vodka from a small refrigerator and poured five glasses. I really would have preferred only half the amount he poured, but asking for that, given the day, would have been «некультурный» (*nekulturny*) in the extreme. As soon as Gennady joined us, Viktor gave the toast. ("rude")

"«Ваше здоровье» (*Vashe zdorovye*)!" Viktor exclaimed. "«Многая лета» (*Mnogaya leta*)!"

We raised our glasses, and my soon-to-be grandfathers and brother repeated the toast to my health, and wished me 'many years', and then we all drank our glasses.

"Out of deference for my soon-to-be doctor son, we'll leave it at one glass rather than the traditional three!" Viktor said. "Not to mention he needs to take my daughter to get the rings."

"Thank you," I replied. "Though I'll be a son long before I'll be a doctor!"

"Congratulations, Mikhail Petrovich," Nikolay said.

"I agree," Valentin added. "Congratulations and welcome to the family!"

"Thank you both."

"Do you prefer to be addressed in the American or Russian way?" Nikolay, who was Viktor's father, asked.

"The usual way for my generation is in the American way, and I believe the bishop will ordain me as Deacon Michael."

"Then Mike or Michael it will be, at least until I should call you Father Deacon."

"In private, as your grandson by marriage, informal address is proper. You can be sure MY grandfather will do that!"

Both men laughed.

"Will Mikhail Ivanovich be at the church tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said. "I spoke to him on Thursday evening after I asked my future father-in-law for his blessing to marry your granddaughter."

"And your parents?"

"I invited them, as well as my sister and her boyfriend," I said.

"Very good."

Yekaterina came into the study and announced lunch was ready, so we all went to the dining room to eat. Elizaveta was dressed in a nice grey skirt and light blue blouse, and made a point of showing me her wrist around which the tennis bracelet was wrapped, then fingered the choker as well. It looked very sexy, and I regretted that it would be eight months before I could see it the way Clarissa had teased me.

When we finished the wonderful meal, Elizaveta was allowed to leave without helping clean up so we could go to the jewelry store. We excused ourselves and walked out to my car. I opened the passenger door so Elizaveta could get in and closed the door after she did. I walked around to the driver's side, got in, started the car, and pulled out of the driveway.

"When did they tell you?" I asked.

"About fifteen minutes before you arrived, when they brought me the dress and veil. They had to pull that dumb stunt with my brother, or I would have heard it from you!"

"It's good to let them have their fun, even if it spoiled the surprise a bit."

"Did you know they were going to do that?"

"I guessed they might do it after I talked to your dad. Are you upset?"

"No! I got what I wanted!"

"Not yet, you haven't!" I teased. "At least according to your grandmother!"

"You're supposed to be on my side, now!" she protested.

"I believe it's in our best interest to listen to your grandmothers. Your dad told me that you could spend as much time with me as you wanted and that I was welcome at the house any time."

"Really?" she asked excitedly.

"Really. He did say we both have to maintain our good grades, which means I have to keep my study habits, which I would anyway and which I've told you

about. We can go out on Friday nights. I'll continue coming to lunch on Saturdays, and then on Sundays, we'll probably start spending the afternoon with Tasha and Nik."

"I'd like that! When is the wedding? My grandmothers didn't know."

"May 26th. We absolutely have to wait until after your birthday, and your dad's lawyers will need to file a petition with the State so we can marry before you turn eighteen. And the 26th is the day after my graduation, which means I'll have nothing else to worry about, and we can spend all our time together."

"And why is that good?" she asked with a smirk.

"So you can collect all those kisses," I chuckled. "Also, I have a trip to Europe planned with my friends in June, and I confirmed with your dad that it's OK to take you with me."

"You'll be my husband! He doesn't get a say in the matter!"

I nodded, "And yet, I asked him out of respect. It's like with your grandmothers -- keeping them happy will make our lives MUCH easier. I suspect you agree."

"I do, though they can't run our lives!"

"Of course not, which is why I'm allowing your grandmothers to plan the wedding and everything beforehand. That will keep them happy, AND will make it less likely that they'll interfere."

"How so? You're letting them control things, and they'll want to control everything!"

I shook my head, "Not at all. I'm ceding control over immaterial things which they feel are theirs to control. When it comes to you and me, then you and I will be in control. It'll be like when we have kids -- we'll let the grandparents and great-grandparents dote on them, but we'll decide how to care for them."

"When did you want to have kids?"

"I figure it's best for you to graduate from High School first. I know how difficult it was for a girl I knew back home named April and how difficult it is for Sasha Antonova. May I make a suggestion?"

"Of course, husband!" she said lightly.

"You're going to tease your grandmothers about that, aren't you?"

"Of course! What's your suggestion?"

"When you have your annual gynecological checkup around your sixteenth birthday, ask for a prescription for birth control pills. That will make things much easier and much safer."

"OK. Tell me more about going to Europe. Would that be our honeymoon?"

"I was thinking the two weeks between the wedding and the trip would serve as a honeymoon because the Europe trip is going to include my friends Clarissa, Abby, Sandy, and Pete."

"I've met Clarissa, and she's sweet. Who are the others? Friends from school?"

At some point, I'd have to reveal Clarissa's 'secret', but I didn't feel this was the time to do that.

"Yes. We plan to go to Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid, Rome, Athens, Vienna, Geneva, Munich, Copenhagen, and London. Mostly, we'll stay at youth hostels, though a friend has offered four nights in a luxury hotel in Paris."

"What's a 'hostel'?"

"It's an inexpensive place for young people to stay, but with almost no services except showers and perhaps access to a washer and dryer. Usually, there aren't private rooms, just larger communal ones."

"So we couldn't have a room to ourselves?"

"Not every night, but some of the hostels do have private rooms. I'll make the arrangements so we have some time together that way, plus we'll have those four nights in Paris. Does that sound OK?"

"It sounds like it'll be fun! Do you think we could go away for a few days right after the wedding?"

"If you wanted to do that, yes. Where would you like to go?"

"What about Niagara Falls? I think it's less than a day's drive."

"How many nights?"

"Maybe three or four? And leave the day after the wedding?"

"If that's what you want, that's what we'll do!"

"You learn fast!" Elizaveta teased.

"We'll see if you ALWAYS think so, «Зайчик» (*zaychik*)!"

"Why did you switch from 'Kitten' to 'Bunny Rabbit'?"

"No reason; do you prefer one over the other?"

"I like 'Kitten' better."

"ОК, «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*)!" replied with a smirk.

"You did that on purpose! That's TEN kisses!"

I chuckled, "I think you can have all the kisses you want after tomorrow, «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*)!"

"Hmph!" she replied, crossing her arms.

"Sorry, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I grinned. "You know I was teasing." ("Kitten")

"I know," she replied, sticking her tongue out at me.

"Very mature," I chuckled.

"Says the man who is acting like a five-year-old boy!"

"Guilty as charged!"

We arrived at the mall and walked to the jewelry store, where the same clerk used the sizing rings to determine what size ring Elizaveta needed, then brought out two ring boxes. I signed the receipt, and we walked back out into the mall. I decided I wanted to buy something for Elizaveta, so we walked to the toy store, and I found an appropriate white, long-haired stuffed cat, which I bought and

gave to her right away. I received a quick kiss in return. I took her hand, and we headed for the car.

"I guess I can't do that once you're ordained."

"Actually, chaste kisses in public are OK, just not in the church building. You'll be my wife, after all!"

"I'm curious -- will you wear your wedding ring after you're ordained? Father Nicholas doesn't."

"Priests don't, by tradition. The theology says it's because they serve God first, before anything, but practically, when handling the Eucharist you don't want jewelry which might trap particles. Matushka wears Father's ring on a necklace, which is also traditional. Father Deacon Grigory wore his wedding ring."

When we got to the car, I helped Elizaveta in the passenger side, then walked around and got into the driver's seat. I started the car, backed out of the parking spot, and headed back towards Elizaveta's house.

"Will you wear your cassock full-time?" she asked.

"That's something I'll discuss with the bishop. I don't believe Deacon Vasily wears his when he's working in the pharmacy; I believe he wears a dress shirt, tie, and his white lab coat. I'll also have to take into account what the school says with regard to that or what any hospital I might work in thinks about it. Father Herman doesn't usually wear his cassock when he's doing home inspections, but he does on occasion. The bishop would prefer priests to wear their cassocks at all times, but some people might be bothered by it, so it gives them some freedom. Deacons get more freedom."

"Did you hear from the medical school yet?"

"No. I don't expect to hear until towards the end of October, and it could be longer. I'm still waiting to hear about an interview in Pittsburgh."

"But you're going here in McKinley, right?"

"That's the plan, and with my grades and test score, I should get in. Clarissa and Sandy should get in as well, and they'll be part of my core study group, just as they are now."

"You seem to have lots of female friends," she said carefully.

"I do. I guess you could blame Jocelyn for asking me to be her friend in kindergarten. I just got used to being around girls because she's been my friend basically forever. I do have friends who are guys -- Robby, Lee, José, Pete, Jason, Clark, and others. But none of them plan to be doctors. Clarissa asked me to be her study partner back during Freshman year, so that was kind of like Jocelyn asking me in kindergarten."

"You weren't interested in Clarissa?"

Now was the time to reveal the secret because I didn't want any of my comments about Clarissa or any of my interactions with her to send the wrong message to Elizaveta.

"«КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I said gently, "Clarissa is a lesbian." ("Kitten")

"What?!" she gasped.

"It's something she's known since she was fourteen."

"But..." she protested.

"But what? Yes, fornication is a sin, but as I revealed to you, it's a sin I've committed. I'll point out Clarissa comes to church regularly, and she listens when I talk about the faith."

"But..."

"Remember, Jesus ate with sinners, and more importantly, everyone in the church is a sinner in some way."

"It's just that it's...it's disgusting to think about!"

"Then please don't think about it," I replied gently. "I should tell you I have friends who are gay, too. And yes, Father Nicholas is aware of them as well. They've been to church."

"Those two cute guys?" she asked.

"Yes, but you didn't know until I told you, did you?"

"No."

"Which means they're behaving properly. If you can accept me as your husband despite me being a sinner and accept Sasha Antonova despite her obvious sin, I think you can accept my friends despite the fact they're sinners. After all, you did say Clarissa was sweet."

"But what about when we have kids?" Elizaveta asked.

"It's not contagious," I replied. "I certainly haven't caught it!"

Elizaveta laughed, which I took as a good sign.

"You can be very silly at times."

"I know," I grinned. "Are you OK?"

"I've never known anyone who was lesbian or gay, and it's sinful. But you made a good point about that," she said, then continued. "Why did *you* do it?"

"You mean what I confessed to you?"

"Yes."

"To be honest, I thought I was going to marry that person, and we'd be together forever. Some things happened, beyond both our control, that prevented it."

"You were engaged?"

"No, but we may as well have been. But that's in the past. I really can't say more without revealing a confidence which would be completely inappropriate."

She was quiet for a moment, and I was positive she thought it was Tasha, and while THAT was true, it wasn't Tasha I was referring to, but Jocelyn. I knew I had very little wiggle room in what I could say beyond what I'd already said, and I hoped Elizaveta would drop the issue.

"Did you like it?"

I nodded, "It's very enjoyable."

"I took health class, but they were really careful about talking about that."

"Same here. Health class was very light on details, really. It was mostly about how to get pregnant, which I think all of us knew beforehand!"

"Duh!" Elizaveta laughed. "The only thing I learned about, really, was birth control and diseases."

"Same as me, then."

"So, how did you learn?"

"A book. I promise to teach you!"

Elizaveta laughed, "So you ARE good at it!"

"Only you can judge, but that's not until May! Until then, you may have kisses! Do you have a concern?"

"Uhm, well, a girl I know said she did it, and it was bad, but she thinks it was because of the guy."

"If he didn't have experience and they didn't have anything other than health class to go by, that isn't too surprising. If it hadn't been for the book I told you about, we might have had that problem the first time. It said basically everyone figures it out eventually."

"How many kids do you want?" she asked.

"I always thought two was the right number, but I'm not against having more. What about you?"

"At least two, but I'm not sure."

"We have lots of time to think about that," I replied. "There is one thing I'd like to do, and that is get pre-marital counseling."

"From Father Nicholas?"

"Yes, of course, but also from a psychologist I know who I've been seeing. She's helping me prepare for medical school, and she's also helping my friend Angie. Do you remember her?"

"The pretty red-haired girl from a few years ago?"

"Yes. She has some significant mental health issues, which is why she moved home. She's going to Saint George in Loveland now."

"She was your girlfriend, right?"

"Sort of," I replied. "We never went steady, but we did a lot of things together. Her problems prevented it from becoming serious."

"I always wondered what happened to her. You dated Katy Malenkova for a bit, too."

"Yes, but she decided to go to Stanford, and she's going to stay in California when she graduates because there are a lot of good companies near where she's going to school."

We arrived back at Elizaveta's house, and I handed the ring boxes to Yekaterina, who would give them to Father Nicholas. Elizaveta and I went to the backyard and sat on the bench. When her grandmothers didn't follow us out, she scooted close so that our shoulders and hips were touching. I took her hand, and she smiled.

"We need to decide on sponsors," I said. "And we need to ask them tonight."

"Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov? They're my godparents. And I spoke to her already about you."

I chuckled, "I'm not surprised. What did you tell her?"

"That I intended to marry you. And that you would agree."

"I swear, there is something in the chrism when it's applied to Russian girls!"

Elizaveta laughed, "Perhaps. Do you agree?"

"I do. I get along well with Mr. Sokolov."

"Then it's settled. I'll ask my godmother tonight."

"Good."

"Who are your godparents?" she asked.

"Mr. and Mrs. Vikhrov, but they moved to New York when I was ten, so I don't see them very often. I'll invite them to the wedding, of course."

"Good! How is school?"

"Fine. How about you?"

"Fine."

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"For school? *The Great Gatsby*. I don't particularly like it."

"I didn't like that one much either. What about for enjoyment?"

"*Roots*, by Alex Haley," Elizaveta replied.

"I read that right after the TV series was on back in '77. What do you think?"

"I've only read about fifty pages, but it's very interesting."

"Our English teacher, towards the end of my Senior year of High School said that researchers found all kinds of errors in the book, but I still enjoyed it. I think Haley called it a 'historical novel,' so to me, that says he wasn't trying to be totally accurate. I think the book did a good job of conveying how bad it was to be a slave. Did you see the TV show?"

"No. I was eight, and my dad thought it was too intense."

"It was pretty intense. Back to *Gatsby* -- what don't you like?"

"That it seems to reject what's good about America and imply that the American dream doesn't exist. But my dad lived the American dream! He went to college, borrowed money to start the Ford dealership here in 1960, and he has been very successful. That's true of Mr. Sokolov and Mr. Orlov and Mr. Zhuravlyov. And that's what you're doing, too!"

"My feelings about the book are similar to yours," I said, "because Fitzgerald thinks people can't really move between classes and that the lower class can't rise above their birth. None of our Russian grandparents even went to college, though my dad's dad did. That's really what bothered me because I know how Mr. Orlov came to the US with nothing and built a business. The same was true for the others, as you pointed out."

"Are you interested in computers?"

"No!" I said vehemently.

"Wow!" Elizaveta laughed. "What happened?"

"I find them frustrating and annoying! The same as I do, Russian women!"

"Careful, husband!" Elizaveta threatened, but she giggled to give away that she understood the joke. "I'm taking a computer class, and I think it's really interesting."

"I had one class, and a friend who's majoring in computers helped me get an A. The only useful thing I've ever done with a computer was play chess against *Sargon* on the computer in High School."

"I play chess, but I'm not very good. My grandfather Nikolay taught me. I guess he played chess in Russia when he was little. Were you any good?"

"I was a 'Class A' player when I was on the team in High School."

"That's pretty good, right?"

"Yes. What else do you like to play?"

"Backgammon. Do you play?"

"I used to play occasionally with my dad because he didn't like playing chess all that much. He used to win a lot when we played backgammon."

"You play guitar, right?"

"Yes. Do you play any instruments?"

"Piano, but I'm not very good. I took lessons when I was younger."

"You should take them again," I said. "I very much enjoyed playing and singing with one of my professors who plays piano. She and her husband are really cool, and I'm sure we could get together with them, too."

"Does she teach piano?"

"Her mom, who is also a professor, does. I can talk to her if you're interested."

"Let me think about it."

"OK. Do you mind if I go back to the dorm for a few hours, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)? I need to tell my friends we're going to be betrothed tomorrow." ("Kitten")

"Nobody knows?"

"Only Clarissa, Sandy, and Lara. I'll see you at church tonight and, of course, tomorrow."

"A VERY special day!"

"Yes, it is."

We got up from the bench and went inside, where I said 'goodbye' to her parents, brother, and grandparents, and then she walked me to my car. We exchanged a chaste kiss, then I got into my Mustang, started it, and with a wave, I headed

back to campus. I was sure Elizaveta's grandmothers would take her to the mall to get her ears pierced.

"Well?" Clarissa asked the second I stepped out of the elevator.

"Wow! Stalking me?"

"I can see the parking lot from my room!" she laughed. "I saw you pull in!"

We went into my room and shut the door.

"She said 'yes', of course. But that was after the silly gag that Russians traditionally pull."

"Which is?"

"I gave her grandmother just the choker, and of course, she didn't think it was sufficient."

"Her grandmother?"

"That's how this works. Anyway, the grandmother brought my 'intended' downstairs. But in true Russian fashion, it was Elizaveta's brother Gennady in a dress and veil."

"No way!" Clarissa said, laughing hard. "With how the old Russians think about homosexuality?"

"I know, right? But it is what they do. Anyway, while he and I tried to not crack up, I gave the tennis bracelet to Elizaveta's grandmother and that met with more approval, so they brought Elizaveta down. I asked, she said 'yes', we had a nice meal, I took her to the jewelry store, and then we had some time alone."

"And you're one hundred percent sure?"

I nodded, "I am. I did talk to her about you, Robby, and Lee today, and after her initial shock, she was OK."

"Really OK? Or submitting OK?"

"I think the base cause of her reaction was twofold -- what she's heard from her grandparents, but she also said it was gross to think about. I advised her gently not to think about it!"

Clarissa laughed, "The way you handle Robby and Lee, minus that one conversation we had so you could have some insight. You were pretty uncomfortable."

I nodded, "Thinking about it still gives me a bit of the willies, which is why I don't think about it! I suspect Glenda had the same view of heterosexual sex."

"The very idea made her physically ill, which I suspect is similar to how you and Elizaveta feel."

"Well, for me, only about Robby and Lee," I smirked.

"You are a P-I-G pig, Petrovich!"

"At your service, Ma'am!"

"And to think, three years ago, you would have been just as grossed out. In fact, if I recall, you were skittish about pretty much anything that even pushed the edge of the envelope."

"True."

"You've really grown and matured, and through it all, you've stayed faithful without turning into a fanatic."

I smiled, "I AM a fanatic, but I only apply it to myself, nobody else."

"Is that what you truly want? To return to how you were before you came to Taft?"

"That could never happen, Lissa. I think the best way to put it is that Jocelyn's accident caused a crisis of faith, which was finally resolved with Lara's insistence on temporary chastity."

"Is that regret I hear?"

"Only in that I missed the mark. And that, in fact, is my struggle. I know having all of those relationships for the past three years was sinful, but I can't imagine what I would have been like had I not been with Jocelyn, Emmy, Melody, Janey, Sandy, Sophia, Kimiko, Lara, Tasha, and you. Maybe the others weren't necessary, and I suppose even the ones I just named weren't necessary, but I can't see how I could have become who I am without them. It's a conundrum I'll probably never solve."

"So it was sinful but the right thing to do? I mean, at least in your mind?"

"Exactly. But I remember something my mom asked me when I expressed my confusion three years ago -- she asked me if I loved God. I do. And in the end, that's what's going to save me. Not rituals, not following rules, not anything. I'm not making excuses for my behavior, but I will, when the time comes, freely admit my weakness and ask for mercy."

"You've never hidden your weakness."

"No, but I sure as heck used it as an excuse and basically turned it into a license to sin."

"And your crisis of faith is resolved?"

"With but one niggling thing which I simply can't resolve."

"Angie."

I nodded, "My love for her and my concern for her balanced against my unwillingness to give up my medical career for her."

"Which would make you the most miserable person on this planet, bar none. And deprive the world of an excellent physician."

"I didn't say I was going to do it, just that I can't resolve balancing love against my own desires."

"What lesson is that teaching you? You always say there is a lesson in everything."

"That when it comes right down to it, I'm not strong enough emotionally or mentally to be what Angie needs me to be. And that makes me question everything about my life. What kind of man am I if I can't do that?"

"An honest one," Clarissa replied. "You have to be true to your calling, and, to be blunt, even if you abandoned everything for Angie, there's no guarantee you could ever have the kind of relationship you want and need. Or that she wants. Doctor Mercer was clear about that, right?"

"Yes. And I know it, but I have this deep-seated belief that «agápē» love conquers all. After all, it defeated death, which is our true enemy."

"Comparing yourself to Jesus? A martyr complex?"

I shook my head, "Not a martyr complex, but we are supposed to follow his example. I'll give you an example, one that's almost always misunderstood. Paul writes that wives should obey their husbands, and that's where idiots like Saddler stop. Paul also instructs husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, giving himself up for her. One thing I've learned from being Orthodox is that obedience is simple; love is difficult."

"I think I see the actual problem," Clarissa said. "You don't feel you could live up to that standard because of your twin callings. And therein lies the REAL reason you need someone like Elizaveta as your wife. Someone who will accept your callings and willingly take a backseat to them, so to speak."

"Which is exactly what Lara said. My struggle, and the one I'm going to need the most help with, is ensuring I give Elizaveta enough love. And I'm not talking physically or romantically; I'm talking about true, self-sacrificing love. And how do I do that when I can't sacrifice either calling?"

"Ultimately, that's why you have to marry Elizaveta," Clarissa said firmly. "Tasha knew that some time ago. Elizaveta meets your needs and, in Tasha's mind and yours, can be both Matushka Elizaveta and Mrs. Doctor Michael Loucks. You have to have someone who is submissive but not a doormat, which is a very difficult balancing act on both your parts. And not just submissive to you, but also the Church."

"Lara suggested, strongly, that I need to allow my feminine side to re-emerge, specifically with Elizaveta."

"She's right."

"You'll help?"

Clarissa smiled, "Of course. And I know Lara and Tasha will as well. We all need to become friends with her so we can help you. And honestly, if I don't, I'll never be able to make use of those deposits you made on my behalf. If I do, maybe, just maybe, it'll work out. Has this conversation helped?"

I smiled, "They always do, Lissa. I just wish there was more I could do for Angie."

"When are you supposed to talk to her?"

"Either tomorrow evening or Monday evening. I wanted to do it face-to-face, but Doctor Mercer strongly discouraged that."

"Because she knows Angie could talk you into it."

"That would take about five seconds, if even that," I sighed. "It's too dangerous to go see her."

"Ever?"

"No. Doctor Mercer is convinced that once I tell her firmly that I can't and why I can't, things will be fine. And when Elizaveta and I go for pre-marital counseling, we'll see Angie together. Doctor Mercer is reasonably convinced that will push Angie to move forward, but we both know it could cause a regression. And that's exactly why I can't try to be what she really wants. I could give up everything and have it blow up in my face and really hurt Angie worse than saying 'no'."

"Mental illness is frightening."

"Tell me about it," I sighed.

"So now what?"

"Now, you try to convince everyone to come to Saint Michael the Archangel tomorrow at noon for the betrothal ceremony without telling them that it's a betrothal ceremony!"

"That won't be easy to do. Why not just tell them?"

"I'll leave it up to you, Lissa. Tell them if you need to, but I would like as many of my friends there as possible."

"I'll do my best! Are you coming back to campus after Vespers?"

"Yes. Based on my talk with my future father-in-law and Elizaveta, I'll see her on Friday nights for a date, on Saturday for lunch at their house, and then on Sunday afternoons, when we'll most likely hang out with Tasha and Nik. I'll talk to Tasha about it tonight at Vespers. Elizaveta and I both have to maintain our grades and, obviously, I have my other responsibilities."

Clarissa left and I changed into my usual black attire for church, and when Lara came to my room, we left for Vespers at Saint Michael.

"Did everything go as planned?" Lara asked.

"It did, including that silly Russian tradition."

Lara laughed, "How did Gennady look in a dress?"

"He doesn't have the legs for it," I grinned. "And the beard was a bit off-putting!"

"I bet! You're having the betrothal ceremony after the Divine Liturgy tomorrow as planned?"

"Yes. Clarissa is inviting everyone but trying to keep quiet about the reason."

"Most of them will expect ME to be the one. You're just messing with them the way Elizaveta's family messed with you!"

"Who? Me?"

"Yes, you! And I love it! Nothing like keeping everyone off-balance! May I ask an indelicate question?"

"I asked you to be my confidante," I said, "so I'd expect you to ask those kinds of questions."

"Does she know you aren't a virgin?"

"Yes. I basically confessed to fornication but gave vague details. I'm sure she assumes it was either Katy or Tasha, with Tasha being the most likely. She doesn't really need any details."

"She'd lose her mind, wouldn't she?"

"Probably, but you know I've confessed, just as you have, and we're to have 'no further care'. I think it's sufficient she knows I had sex, not the number of partners."

"It's larger than I think it is, isn't it?"

"Probably. But you're responsible for getting me back on track and helping me resolve my crisis of faith."

"Asking you to be temporarily chaste?"

"Yes. And snapping me out of the delusion that what I was doing was somehow OK."

"It was more than 'OK'," Lara teased but then became serious. "Sorry; I know what you meant."

I chuckled, "It's OK. I agree with you, by the way, that it was more than just 'OK'. I basically had a crisis of faith which started when Jocelyn was in her accident, and you helped me get back on track, both by agreeing we shouldn't sleep together before we decided what to do with our future and by insisting on chastity over the Summer."

"I am sure you made the right decision in every instance from the time I first talked to you. This is right, Mike. Don't second-guess yourself."

"I'm actually more at peace with my life than at any point in the past four years. What makes you think I'm second-guessing?"

"Just a feeling, I guess. Maybe it's because of the situation with Angie. I never knew her, but everyone has told me about her. I guess they felt I needed to know about the two of you if we were going to be a couple."

"I had this conversation with Lissa earlier, and it comes down to being true to my calling because I'd be risking everything for something with little hope of success."

"You're still in love with her?"

"Very much so. But I also know, from all the time I spent with her, that's not nearly enough. I'm simply not capable of walking down that path, if it even CAN be walked down. Doctor Mercer believes Angie will never be able to have that kind of relationship, and she could easily end up institutionalized down the road. As Clarissa and I agreed, mental illness is frightening."

"It is. And you would be miserable if you gave up your medical career to care for her because that is what you'd have to do."

"Oh, I know." I sighed. "It's so strange because she and I never got past chaste kisses, but we were more intimate than anyone I've dated."

"They didn't call her 'Mrs. Loucks' for nothing."

"No, they didn't," I agreed.

We arrived at the church, which put an end to the conversation. When we got out of the car, I donned my cassock, and we walked into the church. I went to the altar, received Father's blessing, then let him know that Elizaveta's grandmother would be bringing the rings to place on the altar.

"Then I'll make the announcement after Vespers tonight."

"I don't think an announcement is necessary -- we just do it right after the Divine Liturgy."

"Michael, some people will be offended by that."

I nodded, "You're right, Father. Do as you feel appropriate. I did tell my family and my grandparents before I asked her."

"Who are your sponsors?"

"Elizaveta is going to ask Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov. She's sure they'll say 'yes' because they're her godparents and because Mr. Sokolov and I get along well."

"They're a good choice, and I'll approve when they ask for my blessing. Shall we vest?"

We went into the vestry, put on our vestments, then began the preparations for Vespers. When Yekaterina arrived, she came to the right-hand deacon's door and knocked softly. I opened the door, and she handed me the boxes with the rings. I thanked her, closed the door, and then handed the boxes to Father Nicholas. He removed the rings from the boxes, placed the rings side-by-side on the right side of the altar table, and handed me the boxes. I put them in the vestry, then returned to my place to await the start of Vespers, focused on silver and gold rings which lay upon the altar table and which signified my future.

XXIV. Betrothal

September 29, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

At the close of Vespers, Father Nicholas, I, and two acolytes left the altar. Father Nicholas completed the prayers, which served as the Dismissal, then turned to the congregation.

"One announcement," he said. "Tomorrow, immediately following the Divine Liturgy, we'll have a betrothal ceremony for Subdeacon Michael and Elizaveta Kozlova."

There were a few gasps, but otherwise, no real reaction because we were in the nave, where applause or chatter was completely inappropriate.

"They intend to marry on May 26th, and, God willing, His Grace, Vladyka ARKADY, will ordain Subdeacon Michael to the diaconate on July 28th."

"*Axios!*" several people called out, using the traditional Greek version of 'He is worthy', something which was actually necessary for ordination. The bishop would ask for the congregation to publicly approve the ordination before it was performed, and that would be their response, assuming they agreed.

Father Nicholas signaled for the congregation to come forward to kiss the cross, which they did. I, as was the norm for subdeacons, went last, after the acolytes, and then followed Father into the altar and then into the vestry to remove our liturgical garments.

"I assume there will be some kind of special treats at lunch tomorrow?" he asked.

"I know Elizaveta's grandmothers were preparing something, but I'm not sure what. I told them yesterday that I was leaving all the planning in their hands."

Father Nicholas laughed, "You do have a keen sense of self-preservation!"

"I suggested to Elizaveta that we allow them to just do their thing to ensure we're on good terms with them."

"What about pre-marital counseling?"

"I want to follow a dual track," I said. "The usual Orthodox one where we meet with you, and we also spend time with the Sokolovs, as well as with the psychologist I've been seeing."

"The one who's helping Angie, right?"

"Yes, but me, too."

"I have no objections to that. She's aware of Elizaveta's age?"

"Yes, and she gave me a bit of grief about that."

"I'm not surprised. So you prevailed on her?"

I shook my head, "No. She objects. I actually chose her because she'll be keenly aware of the kinds of difficulties we'll run into."

"Taking the bull by the horns, so to speak?"

"How many chances do I have to get it right?" I asked.

"Exactly one."

"Which is why we need someone who's going to be very direct with us and challenge us."

Father Nicholas nodded, "That's very wise. Let's begin meeting before Vespers. We'll need about thirty minutes each week."

"We'll be here."

I received his blessing, then left the altar. I walked out of the nave to the narthex where Elizaveta was surrounded by the High School and college girls, with other women forming another circle around them. I was greeted and congratulated by a number of men and boys, then waited for the gaggle of women to break up. While I was waiting, Tasha stepped away, so I walked over to her. We moved out of earshot of the rest of the congregation, but to a place where we were still visible.

"Would you and Nik be willing to have dinner together on Sundays?" I asked.

"Yes, of course!"

"Good. We can alternate between your apartment and Doctor Blahnik's house if that's OK."

"We can just be at the apartment. The girls and I are already having lunch on Saturdays, so Sundays are free. I assume we'll start next week?"

"Yes. When are you announcing your engagement?"

"When he asks! It won't be too long."

"Which way will you go?"

Tasha laughed, "Western, believe it or not. He wants to buy an engagement ring, and so on. He's more conservative than you are but not as traditional."

"Just so you know, I confessed to Elizaveta that I wasn't a virgin, and I'm pretty sure she suspects it was you."

"I told Nik I wasn't a virgin, and he was pretty upset, but he calmed down. I'm sure he suspects it was you."

"Maybe these dinners aren't such a hot idea," I said.

"It's fine," Tasha said firmly. "I think it's actually better if they both assume you and I were together, given our history. It protects you, and that's important. You know my dad assumed we were, and my mom knew we were, so that fits the assumptions as well."

I nodded, and we moved back to the throng, which was finally dispersing enough to allow me to move next to Elizaveta, who was beaming.

"You look happy, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I whispered in her ear. ("Kitten")

She nodded her head rapidly.

"We should speak to Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov," she said.

I nodded, and we disengaged from the well-wishers and found the Sokolovs. Elizaveta asked Mrs. Sokolov if we could speak privately, and the four of us moved into the Parish office. Elizaveta made her request, to which they immediately agreed. After congratulations and an invitation to dinner the following evening, which we accepted, Elizaveta and I found Lara and walked out to my car. I removed my cassock, exchanged a hug and chaste kiss with

Elizaveta, then walked her to where her parents were waiting. After handshakes and hugs, I walked back to my Mustang so Lara and I could head back to campus.



September 30, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Mike Loucks in a suit?" Jocelyn teased. "What's next? *'Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together...mass hysteria!'*?"

I was tying my tie on Sunday morning, just before it was time to leave for church.

I chuckled, "It does happen."

"You wore a sports coat for your interviews, right?"

"Yes. Wearing a dress shirt and tie was considered the base standard, and I really didn't feel like wearing a suit while being interrogated!"

"You did say it was like you imagined a KGB or *Stasi* interrogation would be!"

"Actually, that was the background verification part. The interviews were actually fun and interesting. You have something similar, right?"

"Just a background check by the Bar -- they pull your transcripts, test scores, and your 'rap sheet'. There is also a form to sign that says you told the truth on your application. Oh, and your credit report, not that I have one."

"They did that for me, and I actually have one because of the secured credit card I have.

Jocelyn laughed, "Mr. and Mrs. Mike Loucks?"

"That one, yes," I chuckled.

"Is that how you checked in to the hotel?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes!" Jocelyn exclaimed. "And it was Mike's mom's idea!"

"Things kind of went downhill from there with his parents," Lara observed.

"Think they'll show?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea, and right now, I can't let it bother me. I need to focus on Elizaveta. Liz will be at church, as will my maternal grandparents."

"The others are in Chicago, right?"

"Naperville, which is outside of Chicago," I replied. "I'm ready."

"Funeral march or wedding march?" Jocelyn teased.

"Oh, shut up," I replied dryly.

"We'll see you at church," she said.

"OK. Are you waiting until noon, or will you be there for the Liturgy?"

"Bill and I will be there just before the Liturgy starts. Clarissa and Abby are riding with us."

"Sounds good."

I got hugs and chaste kisses from Clarissa and Jocelyn, and then Lara and I left the dorm to head to church. We were early, as I had my regular duties to perform despite the day being special. As I helped Father prepare for Matins and Liturgy, I kept an eye out for my family. My grandparents were the first to arrive, about fifteen minutes before Matins. Liz and Paul arrived five minutes later with Emmy and a guy I didn't recognize with them but who I assumed was her boyfriend, Ken.

A number of others from Holy Transfiguration arrived just as Matins was starting, including the Zhuravlyovs and the Nikatopolises. A number of my friends arrived a few minutes later, including Sophia, Robby, Lee, José, Dona, Pete, Sandy, Jason, and Fran. The real surprise was when, about halfway through, Matins, Milena, and Joel arrived with Doctor Blahnik and Derek. Clarissa, Abby, Jocelyn, and Bill arrived just as the Divine Liturgy was starting, as they'd suggested they would.

When I went out to sing the first 'Little Litany', I suppressed a sigh as my parents weren't in the nave. I had hoped they would find it within themselves to attend, but it appeared they couldn't get past the fact that Liz and Paul were in the church. I sang the Litany in front of the icon of the *Theotokos*, then when it was finished, I moved in front of the icon of Christ to sing the second one.

The rest of the service proceeded as normal, and after the 'Dismissal prayers', I received Father's blessing to remove my vestments and cassock, which I did. I put on my suit coat, then went to stand next to Elizaveta in the narthex to wait for the betrothal ceremony to begin. My grandfather moved next to me.

"Mischa, where are your parents?" he asked quietly.

"It appears that they chose not to attend," I replied.

"Why would they do that?" he asked.

"Because Liz and Paul are here," I replied.

My grandfather swore under his breath in Russian and moved back to stand next to my grandmother. I was surprised that he would swear in the church, but then again, I knew just how upset he was and knew my mom would be on the receiving end of a serious dressing down.

"Brethren and honored guests," Father Nicholas said. "Welcome. For those of you who are not Orthodox, or for our Orthodox brethren who have never seen a fully traditional betrothal separate from a wedding, please let me explain a bit about the ceremony. First, you'll notice that Subdeacon Michael and Elizaveta are standing in the narthex. That is traditional, and this ceremony will be performed at the doors to the nave, where everyone except the couple and their sponsors is now standing.

"This ceremony is the first part of the full marriage rite and involves an exchange of rings. You should consider this the equivalent of an engagement, though both will wear rings according to Orthodox tradition. It's also normal for Russian Orthodox to wear their rings on their right hands, so you'll see the rings placed on their right hands during the ceremony. Afterwards, they'll move them to their left hands to conform to the American social norms. We wouldn't want anyone to think they weren't promised to each other!"

There was soft laughter, and Father Nicholas went through the Royal Doors to retrieve the rings from the altar table and brought them to the doors between the nave and the narthex.

"Mike, are we waiting on your parents?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head, and he frowned. One of the acolytes brought the censer, and after Father Nicholas handed the other acolyte the rings to hold, he made the

sign of the cross three times over our heads, then censed us. He handed the censer back to the acolyte and began the Great Litany, which normally would have been done by a deacon.

When the Great Litany was completed, Father Nicholas began to sing the prayer of betrothal.

"O God eternal, who bringest them that are divided unto unity, and who hast appointed for them an indissoluble bond of love, Who didst bless Isaac and Rebekah, and show them to be heirs of Thy promise: Do Thou also bless these Thy servants, Mikhail and Elizaveta, guiding them unto every good work. For Thou art a merciful God, and unto Thee do we send up glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages."

The choir responded with "Amen," and Father Nicholas continued.

"Peace be to all!" he sang, with the choir responding, "And to Thy Spirit."

"Bow your heads unto the Lord," he continued, with the choir responding, "To Thee, O Lord!"

Father Nicholas continued praying.

"O Lord our God who hast espoused the Church as a pure virgin from amongst the nations: Do Thou bless this betrothal, and unite and keep these thy servants in peace and oneness of mind. For unto Thee is due all glory, honor, and worship: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen."

The choir responded with "Amen," and then he took Elizaveta's silver ring, held it over my head, and prayed three times:

"The servant of God, Mikhail Petrovich, is betrothed to the handmaiden of God, Elizaveta Viktorovna, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

He then placed the ring on my right ring finger, retrieved the gold ring from the acolyte, held it over Elizaveta's head, and prayed three times:

"The handmaiden of God, Elizaveta Viktorovna, is betrothed to the servant of God, Mikhail Petrovich, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

I was wearing Elizaveta's ring, and she mine, and Father stepped back so that Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov could stand before us. They each removed our rings and transferred them to the other three times, such that in the end, I had on the gold ring and Elizaveta the silver ring, and then they moved to stand behind us once more. Father Nicholas then said the final prayer:

"O Lord our God, Who didst accompany the servant of the patriarch Abraham to Mesopotamia, when he was sent to espouse a wife for his lord Isaac, and Who, by means of the drawing of water, didst reveal to him that he should betroth Rebekah: Do Thou Thyself bless the betrothal of these Thy servants, Mikhail and Elizaveta, and confirm the promise that has been made by them. Establish them in a holy union which is from Thee. For Thou, from the beginning, hast made them male and female, and by Thee, the woman is joined unto the man as a helper and for a succession of the generation of man. Therefore, O Lord our God, Who hast sent forth Thy truth until Thine inheritance, and Thy promise unto Thy servants, our fathers, Thine elect from generation to generations: Do Thou Thyself look down upon Thy servant, Mikhail, and Thy handmaid, Elizaveta, and confirm their betrothal in faith and in oneness of mind, and in truth and love.

"For Thou O Lord, has shown that a pledge should be given and confirmed in everything. By a ring, power was given unto Joseph in Egypt; by a ring, Daniel

was glorified in the land of Babylon; by a ring, the uprightness of Tamar was revealed; by a ring, our heavenly Father showed compassion upon his Son. For he said 'Put a ring upon his right hand, and kill the fatted calf, and let us eat and rejoice.' Thine own right hand, O Lord, armed Moses in the Red Sea; for by Thy true word the heavens were established and the earth firmly formed; and the right hand of Thy servants shall be blessed by Thy mighty word, and by Thine uplifted arm. Therefore, O Master, do Thou Thyself now bless this putting-on of rings with Thy heavenly blessing; and may Thine Angel go before them all the days of their life.

"For Thou art He that blesseth and sanctifieth all things, and unto Thee do we send up glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages."

The choir responded with "Amen," and Father Nicholas prayed the prayers of Dismissal.

The choir and congregation sang *Many Years*, and then Mr. and Mrs. Sokolov each put a diamond earring in Elizaveta's newly pierced ears. Once that was completed, everyone moved to the church hall for lunch, though Father Nicholas had to remove his vestments first. There was a special table set for Father Nicholas, Elizaveta, the Sokolovs, and me, so Elizaveta and I took our places to the right of Father Nicholas' seat while the Sokolovs sat to the left. Father blessed the food, and then we were served by others in the congregation.

"What happened with your parents?" Father Nicholas asked quietly.

"They're upset with Liz because of her fiancé and with me for not agreeing with them and cutting Liz out of my life."

He shook his head, "That's terrible! We'll speak later."

"Yes, Father. I believe my grandfather is going to have words with them."

"I'd be shocked if he didn't. Let's celebrate now!"

"Yes, Father!"

As we ate or tried to, there was a continual procession of well-wishers, including my friends.

"Well, THAT was out of left field," Robby said, shaking my hand.

"I see Clarissa got you here without giving away the secret."

"With all due respect, you're certifiable!"

"And in other news," I grinned, "water is wet!"

"I guess we'll have to stay past the end of the semester," Lee said.

"You have until Sunday at 6:00pm to be out of the dorms, so it'll probably work out OK. If there are problems, we'll sort something out."

"Congrats again, and we'll let others harass you!"

I chuckled and they moved off, and others came by as we continued to eat. When we finished eating, there was cake and ice cream, and after that, all six grandparents took pictures.

"I'll pick you up at 5:30pm for dinner," I said to Elizaveta. "Mrs. Sokolov said we should dress casually."

"Good! I love this dress, but I don't want to mess it up! I have to wear it again in May!"

"Did you want your kiss?" I asked with a grin.

"Perhaps when you pick me up," she said demurely. "I want a really good one!"

I nodded, we hugged and exchanged a chaste kiss, and then I walked her to her parents' car. Once she was in the car, I walked back to the doors to the church where my grandparents, Liz, and Paul were waiting with Lara.

"You look sharp, Mikey!" Liz said, and we exchanged a brotherly hug.

"Thanks, Liz. You look nice, too, but a dress?"

"You're in a suit!"

"True! Hi, Paul!"

We shook hands.

"Congratulations, Mike, and thanks for inviting us."

"You're welcome."

"Mischa," my grandfather said, "do you think you can talk your sister into a church wedding?"

"Grandpa," Liz sighed.

"I wouldn't be your grandfather if I didn't at least try!" he said.

"True," Liz agreed. "You know I love you, «Дедушка» (*dedushka*), but neither Paul nor I want to go to church."

I was surprised that Liz had used the Russian word, but I saw my grandfather's hard stare soften instantly and understood just why Liz had done that.

"Mischa," he said, "I'm going to speak to your parents."

I nodded, "I understand. I've tried. Perhaps you can have more luck."

"Trust me, Mischa, I'll take care of it."

I nodded, "Thank you."

"Is there anything you need?" he asked. "Anything at all?"

I shook my head, "Not that I can think of."

We all said 'goodbye', and Lara and I headed for my car for the drive back to the dorm.

"What time do you have to leave?" Lara asked.

"Around 5:10pm," I replied. "Why?"

"Doctor Blahnik invited the gang to her house for the afternoon."

"Shoot!" I replied. "I wish you had told me before I sent Elizaveta home."

"Oh! Sorry, I didn't even think about that."

"This is where I need one of those radio telephones you see on TV. We'll be late if we go get her because she'll have to change, then I'll have to change, but I don't see a choice."

"I agree. You can't leave your fiancée out of it!"

I turned at the next intersection and headed towards the Kozlov's house, arriving about three minutes after they had. I parked, got out of the car, went to the door, and rang the bell.

"Mike?" Mr. Kozlov said, surprised, when he opened the door.

"One of my professors is having an impromptu reception, which I just found out about from Lara. I'd like to borrow my betrothed for a few hours, please!"

He laughed, "She is yours, Mike! One moment, and I'll send Yulia up to tell her. How should she dress?"

"The same as she planned for dinner is fine."

"OK. I'm sure she'll be quick!"

I waited in the foyer while Yulia went up to tell Elizaveta, and five minutes later, she was back, dressed in a casual pleated skirt and a soft blue sweater.

"Hi!" she gushed.

"Doctor Blahnik is having a reception at her house, and I just found out, so I came to get you!"

"OK!"

"I'll have her home by 9:00pm," I said to Viktor. "It's a school night."

He laughed, "I'm sure she's in good hands, Mike!"

We went out to my car, where Lara had already moved to the back seat, and I helped Elizaveta into the car. The girls greeted each other and began chatting as I drove back to campus. When we arrived, I realized Elizaveta couldn't come upstairs because she wasn't eighteen.

"«КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I said, "You'll have to wait in the lobby because nobody under eighteen is allowed upstairs." ("Kitten")

"But I'm your fiancée!" she protested.

"I know, but those are the rules, unfortunately."

"I'll wait with you, Elizaveta," Lara said. "Then, when Mike comes down, I'll go up to change."

"OK," Elizaveta agreed reluctantly and frowning.

I gave her a chaste kiss, then went upstairs, quickly changed into khakis and a polo shirt, grabbed my windbreaker, and hurried back downstairs. Lara went upstairs, and when she came back down, we drove to Doctor Blahnik's house so that Elizaveta and I could leave directly from there, which allowed us to stay until 5:20pm and still make it to the Sokolovs' house by 5:30pm.

When we arrived at Doctor Blahnik's house, we were greeted by our friends and spent time socializing and munching on snacks. At about 4:00pm, Milena came up to me and handed me my guitar.

"You have to sing to her," she said.

I nodded, and Milena invited everyone into the music room. She directed Elizaveta to a chair near the piano, then sat down at the piano. By my chair was a music stand with the music for *We've Only Just Begun* by The Carpenters, which seemed perfect. I started, and Milena played accompaniment while I sang to Elizaveta. When the song finished, everyone clapped and cheered, and Elizaveta leaned forward and kissed my cheek.

"You have to sing *Endless Love!*" José called out.

I nodded, but I had to think of the best way to do it so as not to make Elizaveta feel uncomfortable. Milena solved the problem for me.

"Elizaveta, come sit next to me," she said.

Elizaveta got up, moved to the piano bench, and sat next to Milena. I put down my guitar and moved to stand so I could look at Elizaveta while Milena and I sang. It worked perfectly, with Milena singing on behalf of Elizaveta and me singing to Elizaveta. Our friends roared with approval when we finished, as it was their favorite duet that I could do with Milena. I moved around the piano, took Elizaveta in my arms, and we shared a soft kiss which lasted a few seconds. When we broke it, she put her head on my shoulder and sighed, clinging tightly to me.

"That was amazing," she whispered.

"Thanks."

"What about my really good kiss?" she whispered.

"Wait a few minutes, and we'll go someplace private," I replied.

About ten minutes later, I was able to extricate us from the crowd and lead Elizaveta upstairs to my room.

"Whose room is this?"

"Mine," I said. "I was going to live here once I graduated. I have other plans now!"

Elizaveta smiled and nodded, "Yes, you do!"

I held out my arms, and she stepped forward. I pulled her tightly against me, enjoying the feel of her firm body and the press of her breasts against my chest despite the layers of cloth which separated us. Elizaveta turned her head up, and I lowered my lips to hers. Her lips parted, and I gently pressed my tongue between them. Our tongues touched and danced, and Elizaveta moaned softly and squeezed her arms tightly around me. We kissed for a good minute, and when I broke the kiss, Elizaveta was breathing hard. She put her head on my shoulder but didn't loosen her arms.

"Can we come here?" she asked quietly.

"We can't do anything more than kiss before we marry," I said gently.

"Eight months," she sighed.

"And then eighty years together," I replied.

"Will it be as good as I'm imagining?" she asked quietly.

"Better," I replied.

Elizaveta sighed deeply, reluctantly released me, and we left the room and went back downstairs to the reception. At about 5:15pm, we bade everyone 'goodbye' and headed to the Sokolov's house. When we arrived, Mr. Sokolov greeted us, and we went right to the table. Mr. Sokolov asked me to give the blessing, which I did, and then we served ourselves from plates and bowls on the table.

"Michael, perhaps this isn't the time to ask, but do you intend to work at all next Summer?"

"I already spoke to you about our trip to Europe, so you know I can't work for most of June and part of July, so I'm not sure it makes sense to take hours from someone who needs them. That will let me spend time with Elizaveta before medical school starts. Time together will be at a premium for six years after that."

"I think that's wise," he said. "May I ask why your parents weren't at church today? I saw your sister and your grandparents."

"It's an internal family matter," I replied. "My grandfather is dealing with it."

"Did you do something that caused this?" he asked.

I shook my head, "Not directly, but I did refuse to take sides in a disagreement they had with Liz. I'd really like to leave it there, if I may."

"She's marrying," he said, "but not in the church, according to your grandfather."

"Liz stopped going to church about three years ago," I said. "I've talked to her about it, but I haven't had much success."

"Who are your godparents, Michael?"

"Alexandr and Yelena Vikhrov," I replied. "They moved to New York about twelve years ago. I will invite them to the wedding, of course, but I haven't seen them in quite some time. I do get cards from them, and I talk to them on my name day."

"I met them many, many years ago when Vladyka ARKADY was enthroned. Alexandr works for IBM, if I remember correctly."

I nodded, "That's correct. He's at the headquarters in a city named Armonk."

"Do you know which deacons will be your sponsors?"

"Father Deacon Vasily and Protodeacon Seraphim," I replied.

"Have you decided where you'll live?" Mrs. Sokolov asked.

"Elizaveta's father offered the cottage on their property. I think that makes sense, don't you, Elizaveta?"

"Yes," she agreed. "At least until Mike graduates from medical school. There's sufficient room for a baby, too."

"So you've discussed children?" Mrs. Sokolov asked.

"Yes," Elizaveta replied. "At least two, but only after I graduate from High School. And I think two years apart, so the second one would come sometime after Mike graduates. We'll decide later if we want more than two."

We finished our meal, and then Elizaveta volunteered to help Mrs. Sokolov with the dishes. They went to the kitchen, and after Mr. Sokolov and I cleared the table, we went to sit in the living room.

"Are there any things which concern you, Michael?" he asked.

"Not at the moment," I replied.

"I'm curious about the whirlwind nature of the betrothal. You've brought quite a few young women to church, and I know my wife matched you with Katy Malenkova."

"Elizaveta noticed as well, and a few months ago, forcefully made the point that I was ignoring the girls in the church in favor of non-Orthodox girls. Her arguments were persuasive."

Mr. Sokolov laughed, "That seems to be the nature of Russian women! Miloslava was most unhappy when you and Katy chose to go separate ways, but she's obviously very happy with this outcome! She couldn't match you to Elizaveta three years ago, obviously. She was hoping you would be available in April when Elizaveta will turn sixteen, but the bishop nearly derailed that."

I nodded, "Which is why Elizaveta took matters into her own hands despite only being fifteen."

"She's far more mature than some of the girls who are a little older. In a way, she's like Natalya Vasilyevna. Can you share what happened there?"

"Absolutely. Tasha felt she needed far more attention than I'll be able to give her or the children she wants to have soon. And yes, I've spoken to Elizaveta about that, and she's spoken with Doctor Evgeni's wife to get an idea of just how bad things will be in about three years when I start doing Sub-Internships and Clerkships."

"Do those have normal schedules?"

"I honestly don't know. Apparently, quite a bit depends on where you elect to do them. For example, I'll do my OB/GYN work at a Roman Catholic hospital in Cincinnati or Columbus so I can avoid performing elective abortions. Other than that, I haven't really investigated because I've had so many other things to worry about, including getting into medical school."

"You're going to have to make a supreme effort to ensure that you give Elizaveta sufficient love and attention while completing your studies and training. Remember, even little things like telling her you love her, or holding her hand, or bringing her small gifts will help her remember that you love her."

I nodded, "I'm not the most romantic person in the world, but I'm sure I'll get good advice from my female friends. Elizaveta and I are going to start having a weekly dinner with Tasha and Nik."

Mr. Sokolov nodded, "Good. Another young couple, who are also faithful, makes a good foundation for the future. And, of course, those of us of your grandparents' age can provide a bit of wisdom gleaned over the years!"

"What was the most difficult thing for you and your wife?"

"For me, it was always having to consider what Miloslava would think about anything I said or did. Before we married, I could more or less do as I pleased, within the bounds of proper behavior. Once we married, even something so simple as the type of tissue we kept in the bathroom had to be considered. I always bought what was on sale; Miloslava had very specific requirements, which I discovered after a shopping trip!"

I laughed, "You fought about bathroom tissue?"

Mr. Sokolov smiled and shrugged, "It's better to fight over silly things than important ones. But you see, I couldn't see the difference between the less expensive and more expensive tissue."

"But she could, and that created, in your mind, some kind of illogic or oversensitivity?"

"Exactly! I had to simply listen to her and believe what she was telling me, not impose my own judgment. That is the most important thing you can do to have a successful marriage -- listen to your wife."

"And do what she says," I chuckled.

"That's not strictly necessary, but God gives us wives to help us be better men; always remember that."

"Were you and your wife in love when you married?"

"Yes, but that's very different from how we love each other now. We chose each other rather than making use of a matchmaker, but in the end, it comes down to the supreme effort of loving someone for life. I don't know that it makes much difference whether it's an arranged match or a love match, given that divorce rates are approaching fifty percent, and even in the church, we see divorces. The funny thing is, the arranged matches seem to be more successful."

"What do you attribute that to?"

"Knowing that you have to learn to love your spouse rather than assuming you love each other."

Which was very similar to something which Doctor Hart had once said to me. It was a topic I wanted to explore with Doctor Mercer, both one-on-one and as a

couple. Before we could continue, Elizaveta brought coffee and cookies, and Mrs. Sokolov joined us a minute later. When we finished our coffee and cookies, Elizaveta and I said 'good night' so I could get her home and get back to the dorm for study group.

"Will you tell me what the problem is with your parents?" Elizaveta asked after we got into my car.

"I'd be a pretty poor husband if I didn't," I replied. "But you need to keep this between you and me, no matter what."

"Of course! We'll always have private things."

"Liz met Paul four years ago when she was fourteen and he was twenty-four. My parents didn't approve of the relationship. To tell the truth, neither did I. But now that Liz is eighteen, she chose to be with him, and my parents still object. I'm not sure it's a good idea, given everything that happened, but Liz says they're in love, and I believe her. So, in the end, it's up to her to decide to be with him or not."

"Did they..."

"Yes. And that's what caused the problem. Paul got in some serious trouble because of that. But Liz was adamant that he didn't take advantage of her."

"She was fourteen?!" Elizaveta gasped.

"Yes."

"Wow! I think I'm kind of young, but that's, well, pretty crazy. You were older, right?"

I nodded, "Yes. It was after I turned eighteen. I hope you'll allow me to be vague so as not to disrespect the girl."

"I understand," Elizaveta said. "How much trouble did Paul get into?"

"A lot. He actually went to prison for two years for what they call 'statutory rape'. He didn't force himself on Liz, but the law says you can't have sex until you're sixteen unless you're married, and it's very difficult, if not impossible, to get married before you turn sixteen, and even in our case, a judge will have to approve before we can actually marry."

"Dad told me about that," she said. "So what happened with Paul?"

"When he got out of prison, he got a job, found a place to live, and Liz started seeing him again. She always told me she loved him, and I believe her. My parents had a fit about it and wanted me to stop seeing Liz because of Paul, but I couldn't do that because I love Liz so much. My parents feel I'm causing the rift, but all I did was say I would continue to love Liz the way I had in the past. I don't approve of her relationship with Paul, but I don't think that much matters. What matters is what Liz wants. I'm sure there are plenty of people who will object to you and me marrying, just as some objected to Sasha Antonova getting married."

"Who objected?"

"Family Services, for one. I'm sure there are others who think she's too young, just as some people will think you're too young."

"YOU thought that!" she said accusingly.

"I did," I admitted. "But I don't think that now. Tasha helped me see things correctly; well, once you explained things to me."

Elizaveta laughed, "I had to because otherwise I would have lost the chance. The bishop made things difficult because I was going to wait until I was sixteen and then have Mrs. Sokolova talk to you, but I couldn't wait, so I acted. But what do you think will happen with your parents?"

"I think my grandfather is going to come down on my mom like a ton of bricks, and hopefully, she'll be willing to talk to me. I'm sure she wasn't at the church today because of my dad, but if I can fix things with my mom and Liz, then we can both work on my dad."

"When will Liz and Paul marry?"

"December 11th at 2:00pm. It's a Tuesday, and it's at the Harding County Courthouse. I'll take you, if your parents will ask the school to allow you to take the afternoon off."

"I'll ask my mom, but I'm sure she'll say it's OK. Afternoons are gym class, study hall, and French."

"Do you like French?"

"Kisses?" she teased. "I've only had one, but I liked it!"

I chuckled, "I meant the language, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)!" ("Kitten")

"I knew that, but I did very much like that kiss and want more!"

"I think I can accommodate," I replied with a grin.

XXV. Confrontation

October 1, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Hi, Ang," I said when she came to the phone.

"Hi, Mike!" she answered. "How are you?"

"Fine. How are you?"

"OK. Have you thought about what I asked?"

"Yes. Has Doctor Mercer talked to you about it?"

"Yes," Angie sighed. "And you agree with her?"

"It's more complicated than that," I replied gently. "At this point, with my upcoming ordination, that kind of sin would be a serious problem. Father Nicholas warned me, without us talking about you, that he'd have to tell the bishop I wasn't qualified for ordination if I sinned in that manner at this point."

Angie sighed deeply, "But do you agree with Doctor Mercer?"

"No," I replied. "I actually don't. But the disagreement is about whether the risk would be worth taking if circumstances were different, not about whether it would be risky, which it would."

"Because I might have a relapse, right?"

"Yes. May I ask you what you think would have happened last Summer if I'd done what you asked?"

"Doctor Mercer thinks I would have had a breakdown no matter what, and it might have been worse if we had done it."

What bugged me, and what I couldn't say, was that Angie seemed *normal*. But I also realized that her 'normal' was not necessarily stable and that whatever the underlying cause of her instability might be, it hadn't been resolved. That made her mental illness even more frightening -- she could be perfectly 'normal' one day and need to be treated with psychoactive drugs the next. In her current state, she understood that. In a 'meltdown', she wouldn't.

I took a deep breath and let it out before answering.

"I have to say there's a good chance that would have been the case. And that's why I told you I wanted to take things slowly."

"And I accused you of using that as an excuse to never do it with me."

"You did. And I think, in some ways, what you asked me for is just like that."

"I know," she replied, sounding depressed.

"Ang, you know I love you, and I'll help you in whatever way I can, which doesn't involve either of us acting sinfully."

"But before..."

"I wasn't considering that aspect of our relationship. I've finally managed to get past my struggles in that area, and I'm doing my best to live up to the standards which the bishop expects of his clergy."

"Did you ask her? The girl?"

"On Saturday at lunch," I replied. "She said 'yes'."

"Which girl?"

"Elizaveta Kozlova."

"I suppose I'm not surprised. When will you marry?"

"In May. You're welcome to come to the wedding, if you want."

"I do. I'm not upset or angry with you, Mike; I'm just sad. I tried so hard, but..."

She began sobbing softly.

"Angie, I love you."

"I know," she replied between sobs. "And that's part of why it hurts. I'm not sure I can ever love anyone."

And that possibility made ME depressed.

"*Angie? Are you OK?*" I heard a female voice, presumably her mom, ask.

"I'm fine, Mom. I told you I would probably cry the next time I talked to Mike."

"*OK. I'm going to sit here with you.*"

"Mike?"

"Yes?"

"Come see me soon, please? And bring Elizaveta?"

"I will. Are you going to be OK?"

"Mom's here, so yes. I'll probably talk to Doctor Mercer tomorrow. Thank you for calling."

"You're welcome," I replied.

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then collapsed on the couch between Lara and Clarissa.

"Well, that sucked," I sighed. "She was sobbing at the end."

"Because you're engaged?" Clarissa asked.

I shook my head, "No, because she doesn't think she can ever love someone."

"That would be severely depressing," Clarissa replied.

"I know."



October 5, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"What are we doing tonight?" Elizaveta asked when I arrived at her house to pick her up for our first real date.

"Dinner and a movie," I replied.

"Which movie?"

"*Irreconcilable Differences*," I replied. "It's a comedy about a ten-year-old girl who sues her divorced parents so she can go live with her nanny."

"And for dinner?"

"I keep the fast fairly strictly, so either Chinese food or a diner near campus where I can get a nice salad."

"Chinese would be fine. We keep the major fasts, but we're not strict on Wednesdays and Fridays. I'll do what you do."

"That's something we'll work out with Father Nicholas or Vladyka ARKADY," I replied. "And you know the rules are much more lax when you're pregnant or nursing."

"That's what Grandma Yekaterina said. According to my dad, I have to speak to the bishop at some point."

"Yes. You have to agree to my ordination, or he won't do it."

"If I didn't agree, I wouldn't marry you!" she declared.

"I know, but he still has to ask."

"Kind of like you asking my dad if it was OK to ask me to marry you? Or to go to Europe?"

"Something like that, yes. And you need to get a passport, if you don't have one. I'm going to fill out my application on Thursday and mail it in."

"I'll talk to my dad and make sure. But won't it have the wrong name on it?"

"Yes, but you won't have time to get one between the wedding and the trip. We'll just make sure we have the marriage certificate with us."

"Will you teach me to drive?"

"You have to take driver's ed if you want your license before you turn eighteen."

"I know, but I can get my permit next month, and I don't take driver's ed until fourth quarter."

"Yes, I'll teach you."

"Cool!"

"What did you decide about piano lessons?"

"I think after hearing you and your professor friend sing, I have to! I can't have you singing love songs to another girl!"

"I sang to you, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)!" ("Kitten")

"I know, but your friends said you used to sing to your professor when you sang that song and that you do concerts together."

"True. But it's just singing."

"You can sing all the other ones and save the love songs for me!"

"As you wish," I replied.

"I'm not trying to be mean, Mike!"

"I didn't think you were. What you asked for makes sense. José can sing with her; he's single."

"He seemed to have quite a few girls around him!"

"Being able to play the guitar and sing attracts girls," I replied.

"And THAT is why you can only sing love songs to me!"

"Yes, Dear," I deadpanned.

"Oooh! You!"

"How many kisses will THAT cost me?" I teased.

"I think it's the other way now that I have you!" she replied. "I now subtract kisses!"

"So THAT is how it's going to be, is it?" I chuckled.

"One of my friends at school says it's easy to get her boyfriend to do what she wants that way!"

"I think you need a better class of friends!"

"I would never do that," Elizaveta said firmly. "That's just mean."

"It is."

"And besides, I LIKED that proper kiss!"

"Me, too!"

We had a nice dinner at the Chinese restaurant, then walked to the movie theatre. I bought our tickets, a small tub of popcorn, and two small Cokes, and we found seats about halfway back from the screen. The movie was pretty funny, but one exchange between Casey and her dad, which made me laugh, caused a very different reaction from Elizaveta.

Dad: [reading from Tomorrow, a book his daughter was reading]

"Erica James celebrated her 13th birthday by screwing the entire junior varsity basketball team!" What is this?

Casey: A book! May I have it back, please?

"Gross!" Elizaveta whispered.

She had a point, though I found it amusing because it was an exaggeration to make a point, like so many other things in the movie. When the movie finished, we walked to Verner's for ice cream, and then I drove her home. We exchanged a soft, relatively tame kiss on the doorstep, and after she'd gone into the house, I'd returned to campus.



October 6, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I made a trip to the Quick Mart to replenish my supplies, and as I was returning to the dorm, I saw the Calvinist preacher, Tim Saddler, following after Robby and Lee and haranguing them. I really didn't feel like arguing with him, but I wasn't about to allow him to harass my friends. I set the

carton of pop and the brown grocery sack I was carrying on the bench in front of the dorm and quickly walked over.

"Excuse me," I said firmly. "Would you please leave my friends alone? They aren't interested, and you following after them and yelling is harassment."

"They're blatant, vile sinners!"

I shrugged, "So are you, so I'm not sure why you're so worked up about it."

"I do not lie with men!"

"Show me, from the Scriptures, where any one sin is greater than another," I replied calmly.

"Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God."

"Funny, you left off the start of that verse," I replied. "*Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?*". I'd say self-righteousness is about as unrighteous as possible. Jesus certainly thought so! After all, we know from the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee that the self-righteous are condemned. Jesus saved his harshest rebukes for the religious authorities because they were self-righteous and hypocritical."

"How can you defend homosexuals?"

We were attracting other students who had stopped to listen. I was tempted to just walk away but decided I couldn't.

"I'm not defending their sin," I replied, "I'm defending the notion that only he who is without sin may cast the first stone. Are YOU sinless, *Reverend*? If not, I'm wondering why you're here condemning others like the Pharisee instead of repenting like the Publican? I say you're violating the two primary commandments Jesus gave -- to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself."

"I love God!"

"Good," I said, not agreeing with him but letting it go, "then love your neighbor as yourself! When you proclaim the truth in LOVE, then perhaps you'll be worth listening to. Until then, I'll ask you to leave my friends alone."

"You're sending them to Hell!"

"Me? No. I love them."

"Then call out their sin!"

"When I'm sinless, I'll worry about the sin around me."

"Which simply allows perversion to continue!"

"And you think screaming at them will actually change their behavior? Have they been to your church?"

"No, of course not!" he declared, clearly implying they weren't REALLY welcome.

"They've come to mine," I replied, "and listened to the Gospel preached in love. Which of us has the better chance of helping them achieve salvation?"

"Only God can do that! Salvation comes by faith alone, not actions!"

"Well, *Reverend*, you might want to consult your Bible because the ONLY place in the entire Scriptures where the words 'by faith alone' exist, they're preceded by the word 'not'. I think that creates a small problem for your theology. Not to mention that *sola scriptura* isn't taught by the Bible, which makes it unbiblical, and thus a contradiction!"

Robby and Lee both started laughing, as did the other students who had gathered around.

"Mike, challenge him to a debate about Christianity," Robby prompted.

"It's not really worth the time," I replied. "He won't change his mind because he's convinced himself that he alone is the arbiter of what the Bible says."

"Because I know the Bible!" Reverend Saddler protested.

I shook my head, "I don't believe that to be the case."

"Challenge him!" one of the other students encouraged. "You'll beat him, and we won't have to deal with him bugging us every Saturday morning!"

"I'd need to check with my priest and bishop before I did that," I said.

"There are no bishops or priests in the New Testament!"

Now I started laughing.

"Seriously?" I asked. "Yes, I know your version translates «ἐπίσκοπος» as 'overseer', but that is a literal translation, while 'bishop' is the word which evolved in English from the Greek word. They mean the exact same thing! As for

priests, the word «πρεσβύτερος», which you translate literally as 'elder', became 'prester', which became priest in English!"

More laughter erupted.

"Do you see me in fancy robes?" he asked snidely.

"You mean traditional formal wear from the 4th century? Like your business suit is for modern times? We just happen to use an older tradition. And the black robes we wear when we're not celebrating in the temple are traditional street clothes from the same period."

"Mike," Lee urged, "make the challenge!"

"Reverend, will you leave them alone?" I asked.

"I won't stop confronting sin and bringing the truth to this campus!"

I took a deep breath and let it out. I really, really didn't want to debate, but if he was going to harass my friends, maybe I needed to set aside my distaste for confrontation. Assuming I could get a blessing from Father Nicholas, this might be the time and place to do that.

"Assuming I can obtain a blessing from my pastor," I said. "Sure."

"How about it, Rev?" one of the other students asked very irreverently. "Got the guts to debate?"

I realized he was actually trapped -- if he said 'no', that would spread to everyone on campus, and he'd be viewed as being unable to defend his positions; if he said 'yes', he ran the risk of being embarrassed. I was sure that no matter

how badly I did, so long as I stayed calm and composed, and spoke in love, I would be fine. Ultimately, he had everything to lose, and I had nothing to lose.

"The devil can quote Scripture!" he replied.

He was refusing! And his refusal generated catcalls and jeering from the now nearly dozen students standing in a small circle around us. And I knew how to respond!

"So much for *sola scriptura*!" I replied with a smirk. "That isn't in the Bible! In fact, it's Shakespeare, from *The Merchant of Venice*. I think the closest I could come to that concept is the Bible story about Jesus and Satan having a debate, where Satan tells Jesus to turn the stones to bread, and Jesus replies '*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.*'"

There was a smattering of applause.

"The devil quoted Scripture to him at the end of the temptation!"

"Yes, he did quote one verse," I replied. "But you were quoting Shakespeare, not the Bible. Shakespeare's point was that the Bible can be twisted for someone's own purposes. I'll point out that even Satan didn't do THAT -- he was rightly interpreting the verse. Jesus rebuked him because listening to Satan would be temptation, not because Satan was misquoting or misusing the Scriptures!"

"And frankly, that's what you're doing. It's called 'proof-texting' and is an incorrect way to 'rightly divide the Word'. You pick and choose what you quote, ignoring things which contradict what you believe, including the verse I referenced before, which undermines your entire position -- the only place in the Scriptures where the words 'by faith alone' appear, they are preceded by the word 'not'.

"But it gets worse for you. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus confirms that you're quite clearly in error. The sheep represent the saved and the goats the damned, and according to Jesus, as recorded in the Scriptures, the ONLY difference between the sheep and the goats is what they did or didn't do. Period. That's it. There's simply no escaping that conclusion."

"Works righteousness?!" he exclaimed, sounding almost shrill. "You can't save yourself!"

"I never said that I could," I replied calmly. "I simply showed that 'faith alone' can't save you, and according to James, only fools believe that it can. I never described how salvation operates. I simply showed that YOUR interpretation and YOUR theology are wrong. From the Scriptures."

There was more laughter and applause from the group.

"He's a coward!" a student said. "He won't agree to debate because he knows he'll lose!"

If he wouldn't debate, I did have one option, and I decided to exercise it.

I smiled and decided to twist the knife a bit, "It's true that a faith that can't stand up to challenge isn't worth much. But I have to go have lunch with my fiancée. I'll come to find you next Saturday, and we can continue this. Have a good day."

I moved away with Robby and Lee following me and the other students jeering at Reverend Saddler.

"Thanks, Mike," Robby said as we walked towards the dorm.

"You're welcome," I replied.

"You're really going to show up and confront him next Saturday?"

"I think I have to," I replied. "He's become more aggressive. He never bothered you guys before, right?"

"No. We've seen him, but he never said anything to us."

"Any idea what set him off today?"

Both he and Lee shook their heads.

"Not that I can think of," Lee said. "We were just walking back to the dorm."

When we reached the dorm, I picked up the grocery sack and carton of pop, and we went inside and up to my room.

"Think he'll ever debate you?" Robby asked.

"That's a good question," I replied. "He's more or less trapped because if he refuses, it looks as if he's conceding, but if he agrees, I'm going to create enough questions in the minds of anyone who attends that he'll be far less effective. So, in the end, he's screwed either way, which is fine with me."

"What are you doing today?"

"Having lunch with Elizaveta and her family. I'll be back late in the afternoon, but then I'm going to Vespers."

"Interested in getting Chinese delivered and hanging out with Sophia, Clarissa, and Abby at Doctor Blahnik's house?"

"Sure. If Jocelyn isn't out with Bill, invite her, please, as well as Lara, José, and whichever one of the girls he wants to bring."

"Sarah, most likely. Dona has started hanging out with a guy from 6. You've missed quite a bit because you're spending time with Elizaveta and her family."

"I know. It's a tough balancing act and one I'm going to struggle with for several years. Meet you at Doctor Blahnik's house at 8:00pm?"

"Sure. We'll order the food. Bring your guitar?"

"I can do that," I replied.

They left, I put the groceries away and quickly changed so I could head to Elizaveta's house. We had a nice lunch, and as we talked, a name I hadn't heard in a few years came up.

"Mike," Viktor said, "bring your Mustang to the dealer sometime for a check-up. Zach will give it a thorough once-over and a complete tune-up, as well as change the oil and rotate the tires."

"Zach Gleason?" I asked.

"You know him?"

"I do, or better, I did. He was in our study group Freshman year. I remember him saying he had a job at the Ford dealership lined up when he dropped out, but we totally lost touch at that point."

"He's one of the best mechanics we have," Viktor replied. "And he's an expert on Mustangs. If you drop the car off early in the morning, he'll have it done by mid-afternoon. We'll provide you with a ride to and from campus in a courtesy car."

"Thanks. It has been a bit too long since I had my friend Nate back in West Monroe check the car. How does Thursday sound?"

"Any day. I'll make sure the Service Manager puts you at the top of the list."

"Thanks."

When we finished our meal, I was surprised that Elizaveta was excused as well, and as the weather was still nice, we went to the backyard, but rather than sitting, we strolled hand-in-hand.

"Did you make arrangements for our pre-marital counseling?" she asked.

"Yes. We start next week with Father Nicholas, and we'll go to Milford to meet with Doctor Mercer on the 20th, which is two weeks from today."

"I do know how to do basic math, you know," she teased.

"I know. I was just making sure it was clear it was a Saturday. I did check with your dad to make sure it was OK to take you to Milford."

"Respect?"

"And the fact that you're fifteen," I replied. "I know we're betrothed, but you're still underage, and so I want to be absolutely clear that everything is being done properly and with your dad's consent."

"Who could complain? I'm not going to! And I'm sure my parents won't!"

"Busybodies," I replied. "Remember, people tried to prevent Sasha from marrying even though she's seventeen and had a baby, despite the fact that

Yaroslav is perfectly able to support her, and despite the fact that he obviously cares deeply for her."

"But isn't that up to me and my parents? Well, and you, of course."

"I agree with you, but the government has a say because you're a minor. There are some really bad parents out there."

"You mean yours?"

"No, mine are just being difficult. There was a girl back home who was being raped by her dad on a regular basis."

"No!" Elizaveta gasped in horror.

"And I'm sure you've heard of kids who are neglected or beaten, too."

"Sure."

"So it's kind of a balancing act -- preventing kids from being abused, but not interfering with how parents want to raise their kids."

"Dad says the government is mostly not a problem so long as you pay your taxes and aren't stupid."

"He's probably right, though I haven't earned enough to worry too much about taxes other than for Social Security, which aren't too bad, really."

"Dad complains about every penny he has to pay them!"

I chuckled, "I know quite a few people like that. I consider it the price of living in a civilized country. That said, even in uncivilized countries, there are taxes of one

form or another. Russian peasants had to deliver part of their harvest or flock to the local landowner, and so did sharecroppers here in the US. And in the end, I like roads and the Fire Department and schools and all the other things taxes pay for. And that includes Taft and Moore Memorial Hospital."

"Are you a Republican or a Democrat?" she asked.

"I tried to avoid politics as much as possible, but if you push, I guess I'd say I'm what they call a 'Reagan Democrat'. I think I'll vote for him over Walter Mondale next month."

"I know I'm changing the subject, but you have two interviews this week, right?"

"Yes. OSU on Tuesday and Indiana on Thursday. Then Pittsburgh the following Thursday."

"Will you go to those even if you hear from McKinley?"

"Yes, because until Clarissa and Sandy hear, we can't make a final decision."

"But if you don't go to McKinley..."

"Everything will work out just fine, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I soothed. "First of all, I'm sure we'll all get into McKinley, but if not, we can manage OSU or UC. Indiana and Pittsburgh would be more difficult, but we'll find a way if necessary. I promise." ("Kitten")

"Do you prefer I call you Mike or Mischa?" she asked. "You use the Russian word for me."

"Either one is fine," I replied. "I told your grandfathers that the bishop will likely ordain me as 'Deacon Michael', so using 'Mike' is probably most appropriate. But you may call me anything you wish!"

"I do have to refer to you as either 'Deacon' or 'Father Deacon' when I speak to others."

"Not with our families," I replied, "or with my non-Orthodox friends. With people at church? Yes. Well, except in cases where 'Doctor' might be more appropriate. We'll figure it all out when the time comes."

"Is there anything you think I should be doing differently now?"

I shook my head, "No. Is there anything I should be doing differently?"

"Kissing me more!" she exclaimed. "But I guess that has to wait for our date because I don't want my grandmothers to get on my case!"

"You were the one who called me 'husband' in front of them!" I chuckled.

"I was making a point, but they thought I wanted something else."

"Do you?"

"Of course, silly! But you're right about following the rules and behaving properly. Would you like to play backgammon?"

"Sure."

We went into the house and spent the rest of the afternoon playing backgammon and drinking tea. I left to return to campus to change for church, and once Lara was ready, we headed to Saint Michael together.

"Nothing from your parents yet?" Lara asked as I pulled out of the dorm parking lot.

"No. I'll call them tomorrow evening and see if anything has changed. After that, I have to leave it to them to call me."

"Robby and Lee told us about what happened this morning."

"And?"

"Sophia asked Melody to invite Reverend Saddler to a debate sponsored by the Interfaith Club at Taft."

"Wonderful," I chuckled. "I could be accused of the 'pan-heresy of ecumenism' for even talking to them!"

"What?"

"It's something the 'Old Calendar' Greek monks say about anyone who doesn't toe their hard line. Basically, if we even talk nicely to other people who call themselves Christians or don't receive everyone by triple immersion baptism, we're guilty of accepting that there is truth outside the Orthodox Church, which they call shorthand the 'pan-heresy of ecumenism' because it encompasses, in their mind, all the other heresies. They're the same ones who say married couples should abstain from sex except for the express purpose of procreation but otherwise live as monastics."

"That's nuts!"

I chuckled, "I know that, as do our bishops. Those crazy Greek monks don't think we're Orthodox."

"Oh, please!" Lara protested. "You're like the most Orthodox person I know! There is such a thing as taking things too far!"

"Of course there is! You know how serious I am about keeping the fasting rule, right? Well, they consider me lax, AND they think the rule is law, not a ruler or measuring stick."

"So, would you debate him?"

"I think I'm more or less obligated because I challenged him this morning. I have to get Father Nicholas' approval first, though. I believe he'll give it, but I'm not sure Reverend Saddler can accept that kind of challenge. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would be for him and his church if their youth pastor was trounced in a theological debate? Heck, I don't even have to 'win', whatever that means. I just have to tie him in knots with the Scriptures!"

"So you can't lose, and he can't win?"

"That's my assessment, at least in terms of how it affects my situation versus how it affects his. Remember, too, every single error he makes has likely been made before, and has been addressed by the Church. I bet he hasn't looked into Orthodoxy further than thinking we're 'Roman Catholic without the Pope', which is a huge error. We'd say that Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are simply two sides of the same Augustinian coin. Call it 'A' and 'NOT A', if you will."

"Which is what Father was saying in his homily when he spoke of the *Filioque* turning the Trinity upside down and thus distorting the entire notion of the uniqueness of the members of the Trinity."

"Exactly. And from there flows doctrine and dogma which are incompatible with the Orthodox faith."

"Before, when you said the church has addressed all the issues, do you mean there are no new heresies possible?"

"Well, first of all, 'heresy' means division and generally only applies to people who were Orthodox at some point but broke with the teachings of the Church. Others would technically be called 'heterodox', even if they repeat ancient heresies. The Jehovah's Witnesses are a prime example -- they're Arians, despite not having been taught by Arius or his followers."

"And others?"

"Usually, it's some mix of *Monophysitism*, *Monothelitism*, and *Sabellianism*. I'd also say that in practice, the Reverend's church is *Donatist* as well as obviously being *iconoclast*."

"This is starting to sound like Sunday School!" Lara exclaimed.

I chuckled, "What do you expect? I'm a catechist as well, and you're in my Sunday School class! But there's one you probably haven't heard because it's a very touchy subject, and that's *Phyletism*."

"Touchy?"

"It's the insistence on ethnocentric Orthodoxy, which is exactly the situation we have in the US. It's one reason our parishes have moved firmly away from using Church Slavonic and having homilies in Russian, and the Antiochians have moved away from Arabic in most of their churches. The Greeks haven't got with the program completely, but some of their bishops are concerned about losing all their youth because of language barriers."

"So we're heretics?" Lara asked.

I chuckled, "No, but it IS an error that we have multiple jurisdictions here in the US. The OCA, though it wasn't called that, was truly the American Orthodox Church before the Russian Revolution. Things broke down because of the OCA's ties to Moscow and because the other Patriarchates took advantage of the advice from the Russian Synod to elect bishops for ourselves, and instead of forming a unified synod, chose to further their own goals and lay claim to primacy in the US. Someday, it'll be solved, but I won't hold my breath."

"So what do you do about THAT?"

"Obey my bishop. All the churches here are in communion, except ROCOR, who are basically the radical Whites who reject anyone in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate. That'll be solved, too, once the Communists in Russia are 'consigned to the ash heap of history'. But I'll leave those specific arguments to the bishops because that's their role. Mine is to teach and serve."

"I'll bet you anything you care to wager that that pastor doesn't even KNOW those terms you used."

"No bet," I replied.

When we arrived at church, I went into the altar and after everything was ready for Vespers, I asked Father to speak briefly, and we stepped into the vestry. I explained what had happened, and he nodded and smiled.

"Do you remember hearing about the group called the 'Evangelical Orthodox Church' when we heard Father Schmemmann speak at the Cathedral about four years ago?"

I nodded, "The guys who were from Campus Crusade for Christ who adopted what amounted to Orthodox form and theology."

"Quite a few Evangelicals have come to the faith because of them, and you never know what might happen if you were to present the faith in a campus forum. That's where they started."

"They're still on their own, right?"

"Yes. Father Schmemmann was slowly guiding them into apostolic succession when he reposed, but there are others who are working with them. I would love to bring those parishes into the OCA, but that's not up to me!"

"Or me! I take it from this you're OK with me debating?"

"I'm OK with you presenting the truth in love."

"Understood."

"Then yes, by all means, participate."

We went back to the altar and served Vespers, and when the service was finished, Lara and I headed back to campus. We changed, then walked to Doctor Blahnik's house, where our friends were waiting for us, along with Milena, Joel, Doctor Blahnik, and Derek. We ate our Chinese food, and afterwards, José, Milena, and I played and sang, with lots of breaks for conversation. When it was time to leave, Doctor Blahnik pulled me aside.

"Elizaveta is a lovely girl," she said. "I met her when her mom brought her to see Milena to discuss piano lessons."

"I obviously agree!" I replied.

"I just have one regret," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "That we never had the chance to have that glass of wine!"

"Timing and circumstances," I replied.

"I blame Dean Parker for the rules crackdown," Doctor Blahnik replied.

"I think we can lay a LOT of blame at her feet," I agreed.

"You know there's a rumor she's coming back, right?"

"I'd heard that," I replied. "But supposedly not until after I graduate."

"Correct."

"Is there ANYTHING that can be done to stop it? I mean, if it's true?"

"I don't think so. I'm reasonably certain she only agreed to leave on condition she could come back after a suitable time. I can't prove it, but it makes sense."

"Sadly, I agree with you."

"If you need any help with anything, let me know."

"I will," I replied. "Thank you for everything you've done for me."

"I'm sure the future will present interesting possibilities and options," she replied. "But first, you have to pass my Russian Literature course next semester!"

"I think that's going to be very enjoyable, actually."

"I hope all the students agree!"

We exchanged a hug, she kissed my cheek, and I joined my friends for the walk back to campus.



October 7, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Loucks residence," my mom said when she answered the phone on Sunday evening.

"It's Mike," I said. "I missed you last Sunday."

"What did you say to your grandfather?"

"When he asked why you weren't there, I said it was because Liz and Paul were there. He told me he was going to speak to you. I'm assuming he did."

"If you call a two-hour lecture, in Russian, 'speaking to me'."

"And?"

"Your father won't budge."

"So, that's it then? Your children mean so little to you that you'll let this destroy the family? I suspect Grandpa said something similar repeatedly."

"Do you realize the position you put me in? He doesn't know what happened with Liz!"

"I didn't put you in ANY position," I replied. "Had you come to my betrothal, the issue would never have come up! Can't you see that you and Dad are causing the problems here? What was I supposed to do? Claim complete ignorance with Grandpa? He would have known I was lying! Not to mention, I had to answer questions from Father Nicholas AND Viktor Kozlov! Should I lie to everyone, including my priest and future father-in-law? All because you couldn't come to church last Sunday?"

"Mike, you know it's not that simple!"

"It IS that simple," I protested. "You do realize that your son is engaged to a fifteen-year-old girl who is more than six years younger than he is, right?"

"That is VERY different!"

"Why? Because Father Nicholas blessed it? She's underage, just as Liz was."

"Michael, if you are THAT stupid..."

"She'll remain a virgin until we marry for several reasons, but it's still not all that different from what REALLY bugs you about Paul. My concern was his unfaithfulness, something which concerns me greatly because I don't want to see Liz hurt the same way. But that's HER choice, just as it was at age fourteen. Everything that's happened since then, though, is YOUR choice. There would have been no questions of any kind had you simply had the common decency to show up at your son's betrothal ceremony!"

"Michael Peter Loucks! Do NOT speak so disrespectfully."

"Because not showing last Sunday was SO respectful? Listen to yourself! Are you really going to go down this path? The one which leads straight to Hell? Because that's the path you're on. Either you're letting your own hatred of Paul consume

you, or you're letting Dad lead you on the path to Hell. I'm going to break my own rule here and, despite it being none of my business, ask you if you've even been to confession since this issue first arose? You don't have to answer, either. Just think about it and consider the situation you're in! I'm acting out of love, and you're acting out of hate."

"When did you become self-righteous?" she asked accusingly.

"If that's how you see me, then truly, there is nothing to talk about. I love you and Dad. I love Liz. Nothing can change that. But you seem not to care, so I'm going to hang up, and if you ever come to your senses, I'll happily take your call. You'll receive an invitation to my wedding and my ordination, and I hope you'll be there. If not, there really isn't anything I can do about it. Goodbye, Mom."

I waited five seconds, and when nothing was said, I simply replaced the handset in the cradle and collapsed into the chair by my desk. Clarissa came over and rubbed my shoulders. What I really needed was the kind of closeness we had cuddled naked in bed, but that simply couldn't happen, no matter how much I might need it or benefit from it in the very short term.

"You OK, Petrovich?"

I shook my head, "No, I'm pretty fracking far from OK. I honestly do not get it."

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

"You're doing it right now," I replied.

"What will you do?"

"Let my grandfather deal with it. He's not going to sit still for this. His next move is to go to Father Herman. And then," I sighed, "all hell is going to break loose."

XXVI. Family Secrets

October 10, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Subdeacon," Father Nicholas said when I arrived at church on Wednesday evening, "word got to the bishop about your parents not being at your betrothal."

"Wonderful," I sighed. "What was said?"

"He asked if I knew any details, but all I could tell him was that it had something to do with your sister and her fiancé. I told him I believed you were acting out of love. He was concerned, obviously, because for them to boycott your ordination would create a severe scandal, even more so than missing your betrothal or even your wedding."

"It's going to get worse."

"How so?"

"My grandfather is going to most certainly speak to Father Herman if he hasn't already done so. I'm not sure how much Father Herman knows about what went on three years ago, but I don't think that matters in the end. He's going to have to confront my parents, and that's where everything is going to go off the rails and probably get worse."

"This is about that deep, dark family secret?"

"Yes."

"I think you're going to need to talk to one of us -- me, Father Herman, or Vladyka ARKADY and discuss what happened and why it's led to this rift. I'll leave it up to you to decide, but unless there is a resolution quite soon, it could create significant problems."

"If we do this in the context of confession, would that work?"

"We'd need to agree on how much I could reveal to the bishop, and it will have to be enough to allay any concerns."

I nodded, "I'm also going to have to work out what to say to my future father-in-law. He's been asking, and I've more or less said it's an internal family matter relating to my sister."

"We'll discuss it in confession after Vespers. I take it Tasha can give Lara and Clarissa a ride back to school?"

"Yes."

"Oh, before I forget, how did your interview at Ohio State yesterday go?"

"About like the first two," I replied. "We're leaving early tomorrow morning for Indianapolis."

"And the debate with the Reverend?"

"They're trying to come up with a mutually acceptable date, location, and format. I'm pretty much cool with anything, but he's trying to stack the deck."

Father Nicholas nodded, "I'd say you have him worried. Shall we vest?"

We put on our liturgical garb, and an hour later, when Vespers was finished, we removed it. I asked Tasha to take Lara and Clarissa back to campus, spoke for a few minutes with Elizaveta, then joined Father in the nave.

"We can sit on the benches and talk, then do the absolution, if necessary, afterwards."

"That's fine."

Father Nicholas said the prayers before confession, then we sat down on one of the benches which were along the wall, and he put his stole around my shoulders.

"Liz had an affair with Paul four years ago."

"She's eighteen now?"

"Yes."

"I can see why that might be a problem for your parents," Father Nicholas observed.

"He was married and had a son at the time of the affair."

"Lord, have mercy!"

"Which was the reason I called the Sheriff and turned him in. He served two years for statutory rape."

"And you're OK with your sister marrying this man?"

"Does it matter if I'm OK with it? I told her it was a terrible idea, but she claims to love him and to have always loved him. What choice do I have if I'm guided by love? I hope you see my dilemma."

"I do, and your behavior fits your entire approach to dealing with sin -- to give your love and support for the person while doing your best to model proper Christian behavior and witness to the truth by your actions."

"What's the alternative, really? To do what Reverend Saddler did and scream and yell at Robby and Lee? To what end? They'll never set foot in HIS church, but they've been here a dozen times. Which is more effective?"

Father Nicholas smiled, "I'd say the answer is obvious, though you're aware of the potential for scandal."

"Of course. But the church is chock full of 'stinking sinners', of whom I am chief."

"You would be surprised as to how many people mouth those words without understanding what they mean."

"I'm not sure I grasp the full meaning," I replied, "but I do know that I'm in no position to judge anyone. I did point out to my mom that I was betrothed to a girl who is fifteen."

"There is quite a difference between that and what happened with your sister."

"Granted, but Elizaveta is underage at this point. And no, I am NOT trying to hint that anything improper has occurred or will occur."

"I should hope not, for what I also hope are obvious reasons. So, the bottom line is that your parents object to Liz's behavior and don't want to associate with her and her husband?"

"That's basically it. I invited my whole family; my parents chose not to come."

"You did know that by inviting Liz, they might not show up, right?"

"I knew that was possible, but I honestly didn't know what else to do."

"I assume you've tried to talk to your parents?"

"Several times since Liz made public her plans to be with Paul. I did something else, which you need to know about; I helped Paul get his job."

"You don't do things halfway, do you?" Father Nicholas sighed.

"Again, once Liz made her intentions known, how could I not do that? The Methodists run the halfway house, and we do have a prison ministry. It all fits together in the same way."

"Please don't take anything I'm saying as a condemnation of your actions; it's just that in the current circumstances, we're seeing the effects of the ancient proverb 'no good deed goes unpunished'."

"What will you say to Vladyka?"

"I'm not sure, really. You've behaved as a Christian, but your actions could be interpreted as scandalous by some. As we've discussed, Our Lord ate with tax collectors and sinners and was condemned for it. Honestly, the best possible outcome is reconciliation with your parents."

"I've tried, and so has my grandfather, to no avail. I'm willing to try pretty much anything, but I can't even get to the point where we can have an actual

conversation. Their prerequisite seems to be completely abandoning Liz, and I just can't do that."

"Let me try setting up a mediation meeting. I take it you'll attend and exercise humility?"

"Yes, though the last time I talked to my mom, she accused me of being self-righteous."

"In what context?"

"Questioning whether she'd been to confession and accusing her of acting out of hate while stating I was acting out of love."

"And was THAT appropriate, Subdeacon?"

"Theologically sound but not respectful and not properly loving. And something Father Herman should have said, not me."

"If I can get them to meet with us, you have to refrain from doing that, even if you're correct in your assessment."

"Yes, Father. You might also want to speak to my grandfather because I'm not quite sure what he's going to do."

"I'll call him as soon as we're done here. Just so I have all the information -- I take it Liz is not going to marry in the church?"

"Correct. They're going to have a judge perform the wedding on December 11th at the Harding County Courthouse. I plan to be there."

"I understand why, and I agree; just know that others may see that as giving support to her behavior."

"Very few people know the details. Liz's name never appeared in the newspaper, and all the records are sealed, with the exception of the plea agreement, which simply references a 'minor female'."

"Who does know?"

"Our immediate family, Liz's friend Emmy, and Paul. Nobody else knows the full story."

"Was that the real reason why your parents checked Liz into the hospital in Columbus?"

"No, it was because of drug use and risky sexual behavior after Paul had been arrested."

"Do you know what happened to his wife and child?"

"Only that she divorced him and has sole custody. She moved, and Paul doesn't know where she went."

"How much have you talked to him?"

"Mostly just to help him get the job. I also made sure he had the address of the county morgue and made him promise to keep it with him."

"The county morgue? Why?"

"So that in case he ever hurt Liz in any way or even thought about hurting her, he could drive himself there and save the county the trouble and expense of retrieving his body."

Father Nicholas laughed, "Coming from an avowed and committed pacifist, I think that might be quite frightening! I'm curious: how did you handle his criminal record?"

"Do you know Yuri Valentinovich Zhuravlyov?"

"Yes, of course."

"I told him Paul's crime was sex with an underage girl, and he responded that at his age, he should be so lucky."

Father Nicholas laughed and shook his head, "That does sound like him."

"I believe Mrs. Zhuravlyova keeps him in line. Mr. Sokolov told me that God gives us wives to make us better men."

"A truth you must never forget as a Deacon. Listen to your wife and heed her wisdom."

"Mr. Sokolov said that, too."

"Well, perhaps I'll simply leave the pre-marital counseling to him! Is there anything else you need to tell me about your family? Or anything else you need to confess?"

"No, Father."

"Then let's conclude with the prayers of absolution."

We moved before the icon of Christ, and Father put his stole over my bowed head. He prayed the prayer of absolution and made the sign of the cross over me. I kissed his stole, we exchanged a brotherly hug, and then I headed back to campus.



October 11, 1984, Indianapolis, Indiana and McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday morning, Clarissa, Sandy, and I drove to Indianapolis for our interview at Indiana University Medical School. We arrived about twenty minutes before our scheduled time, so we got coffee in the cafeteria before heading to the third floor of the medical school building.

"You must be Michael, Clarissa, and Sandra," a pretty strawberry blonde who was a few inches shorter than I was said.

"Yes," Clarissa replied.

"I'm Jessica Wilton, a second-year student. These are my classmates Jerome Katz and Diana Baum. We're going to take you on a tour, and then you'll begin the interview process."

"Who's who?" Diana asked.

"I'm Mike," I grinned.

"THAT was blindingly obvious," Jessica replied, rolling her eyes.

"This is Clarissa," I said, nodding my head to her, "and this is Sandy."

"You're all from Ohio, right?" Diana asked.

"And you three?"

"Texas for Jessica, Kentucky for Jerome, and New York for me," Diana replied.

"Have you picked your specialties?" Sandy asked.

"Trauma surgery for me," Jessica said. "Internal medicine for Jerome and Diana. How about you?"

"Pediatrics for me, emergency medicine for Mike, and internal medicine for Clarissa."

"There are badges on the table for each of you," Jessica said. "Please put them on, and then we'll begin the tour."

We put on our badges then followed the three medical students down the hall. The medical school was very similar to McKinley, UC, and Ohio State, as was the hospital. When we finished the tour, the medical students gave us each our schedules and led us to the appropriate rooms. I had my application review first, then my physical followed by my psych eval. After the psych eval and a trip to the bathroom, Jerome led me to the panel interview.

"Good morning, Michael," a good-looking man in his mid-40s said. "Please take a seat."

"Good morning," I replied and sat down opposite the panel.

"I'm Doctor Albert Barton, and I'm a trauma surgeon. Doctors?"

"Doctor Richard Hicks, and I'm a general surgeon."

"Doctor Frank Winslow, and I'm an internist with a subspecialty in pulmonology."

"Doctor Nancy Beard, and I'm a pediatric oncologist."

"Doctor Steve Lincoln, Chief Attending in the ER."

"Do you go by Mike or Michael?" Doctor Barton asked.

"Either one, depending on context. 'Mike' is fine."

"Mike, we have your application materials and test results. We're very impressed by your MCAT score. 98th percentile is good enough to get into any medical school in the country. Why are you interested in Indiana University?"

"The medical school has a very good reputation, especially in emergency medicine; it's in the Midwest, which is where I'd like to stay; and Indianapolis seems like a good city."

"You're from a small town about an hour east of Cincinnati, right?"

"Yes. And I'm enrolled at William Howard Taft, a public university in McKinley, which is an hour east of there."

"Are you applying to any schools outside the Midwest?" Doctor Hicks asked.

"No. I have a real desire to stay in the Midwest, both for medical school and for my Residency. I did consider applying to Stanford and Emory but elected not to."

"Would you tell us about yourself?" Doctor Lincoln inquired.

From that point, the interview proceeded along the same basic lines as the three previous interviews. I gave similar answers, and the follow-up questions were nearly identical to the ones asked at McKinley and OSU. I felt the interview went well, and when it was over, Jerome took me to meet the others in the cafeteria for lunch.

"What do you think?" Jerome asked.

"That we're going to have a tough decision if we're accepted by more than one school!" Sandy said.

"We?" Jerome inquired. "As in, you're a 'package deal', so to speak?"

"We'd like to go to the same school, if that's what you're asking," Clarissa said. "If one school accepts all three of us, that's where we'll go."

"You're all friends?" Diana asked.

"Close friends," Sandy replied. "We've had a study group since Freshman year and have done our research projects together. Are you three friends?"

"Classmates," Jessica replied. "We were assigned to do this."

"Ignore her," Jerome said. "Jessica is the teacher's pet, and she knows it."

"Jerome," Diana warned carefully.

"Which professor?" I asked.

"Doctor Barton," Jerome said. "He's probably the best trauma surgeon in the Midwest, at least according to the Third and Fourth Year students and the Residents we talk to."

"Do you have time in the hospital already?" Clarissa asked. "It seems like you know it pretty well."

"Doctor Barton insists that medical students should be in the hospital as soon as classes start," Jessica said. "He believes it's integral to truly learning medicine. Most schools don't let you near a hospital until your third year, but that's changing, albeit slowly."

"That's one of the cool things about this school," Jerome added. "I'm really glad I came here."

"Where did you earn your undergraduate degree?" Clarissa asked.

"UK in Lexington."

"Diana?"

"Stony Brook, in New York."

"Jessica?"

"UT Austin."

"Did the three of you know each other before you started college?" Jerome asked.

"No, we met at WHTU in McKinley," Clarissa said. "What's your biggest challenge?"

"Too much to learn and not enough time!" Jerome replied. "Basically, you have NO life. Mike, you're married?"

"Engaged," I replied. "I'm Russian Orthodox, and we exchange rings when we get engaged."

"That's one way to keep a guy honest!" Diana laughed. "It looks like you're married and off-limits."

"Effectively, we are. Once you have the betrothal ceremony, it's pretty much a foregone conclusion that you'll marry, even more so than a normal engagement."

"When will you marry?"

"Right after graduation," I replied.

"I hope she knows what she's signing up for," Diana added.

"She does," I confirmed.

We finished our lunches, and then we went back to the third floor to meet with the financial aid representatives. Once we completed those, we turned in our badges, bade our hosts goodbye, and left the building. We walked to my car, got in, and headed East.

"I like the idea that first-year medical students get into the hospital," I said as I merged onto I-74 towards Cincinnati.

"Me, too," Clarissa agreed. "But, ultimately, you're tied to McKinley, Columbus, or Cincinnati because of church. And I'm not complaining, just stating a fact."

"What was with the strawberry blonde?" Sandy asked. "She seems like a real cold fish."

"Or a focused medical student who wants to be a surgeon," I replied. "And you both have heard how rough it is for females to get into surgery."

"True," Sandy replied.

"Four down and one to go," Clarissa said. "Are we going to Pittsburgh if we hear before then?"

"I think we should," Sandy said. "It's a couple of hours away, and I'd rather have all our options. Mike?"

"I agree," I added. "We said we'd interview at all five schools. It's basically another tank of gas and a day of our time next Thursday. We're in good shape with regard to our research project and our classes."

"All true," Clarissa agreed. "This semester is actually pretty easy."

"Don't jinx it!" Sandy said quickly, causing Clarissa and me to laugh.

Our drive back to McKinley was uneventful, and when we arrived, I found a note asking me to call Father Nicholas, which I did right away. He had arranged a meeting with my parents, Father Herman, and me at 9:00am Saturday morning at Saint Michael the Archangel. That had the potential to interfere with lunch at the Kozlovs', so I called Elizaveta to let her know.

"Just come over when you're finished," she said. "We'll make something which will keep if your meeting goes long. How was your interview today?"

"Pretty much like the others. We have one more next Thursday."

"I remember! What are we doing tomorrow?"

"Dinner, for sure, but there's nothing playing at the movies that I really want to see. What about you?"

"Not really. My brother saw *Red Dawn* and thought it was really dumb. A bunch of High School kids take out Russian, Mexican, and Cuban invaders."

I chuckled, "I'm not sure which is more unbelievable -- that those three countries would jointly invade the US or that a bunch of High School kids kicked their butts!"

"We can figure out what to do when you pick me up if that's OK."

"It is. See you tomorrow evening."

We said 'goodbye', and after I hung up, I went to join the study group.



October 13, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I headed to church early so I'd have a chance to pray before the meeting with my parents and the priests of both parishes. I chose not to wear my cassock into the church, as I was meeting with my parents as their son, and I didn't want to give appearances of 'hiding behind the bishop'. As I stood in the nave, I reminded myself that I needed to remain calm, not be snarky, and show my parents respect, no matter what happened.

When I finished my prayers, I sat on one of the benches along the wall and gathered my thoughts. A few minutes later, Father Nicholas came into the nave,

and I rose to greet him and receive his blessing. We went to the small meeting room next to his office to wait for the others. They arrived just before 9:00am, with my mom looking grim and my dad looking very unhappy. After greetings all around, we sat down around the circular table.

"Peter and Rachel," Father Nicholas began, "I arranged this meeting because, as Mike's pastor and confessor, I was extremely concerned about your absence from his betrothal ceremony. I spoke with Mike in detail, and he explained the problem to me.

"What?!" my mom exclaimed, obviously alarmed. "Mike, it's a private family matter! You had no right!"

The look on Father Herman's face told me that he didn't know the situation, which made me wonder if my accusation against my mom had been on target.

"I insisted, Rachel," Father Nicholas said gently. "He spoke to me in the context of confession, which means I can't reveal anything to anyone without his permission, and he has not given that. Father Herman, I assume from your reaction that you do not know?"

"I am completely in the dark," Father Herman replied. "Ivan Borodin came to see me, as I told you on the phone, but he made it clear that he isn't aware of the root cause of the problem."

"Father Nicholas," I said firmly, looking my mom directly in the eyes, "in this room, I consent to you discussing anything I said to you in confession on this matter. And that includes my expression of regret for acting disrespectfully towards my mom when we spoke on the phone."

"What I want to say first," Father Nicholas replied, "is that we will always have disagreements between believers, and we are called to seek out our pastor or our

bishop to aid us in resolving those disputes. That is why we're here. I have Mike's commitment to accept my judgment on how he should behave. Peter and Rachel, I'm not your confessor, so I have to leave to Father Herman how he handles things with you. That said, we are all called to act in Christian love towards one another."

"Peter or Rachel," Father Herman said, "can you explain what you believe Mike did that warranted you, in effect, showing your disapproval for his betrothal? And Michael, please let them speak, even if you disagree."

"Yes, Father," I replied.

"Liz is rebelling against us," my dad said, barely containing his anger. "She's rebelling against everything we stand for, and Mike is giving his approval. And now he's airing our dirty laundry in public."

"Peter," Father Herman said gently, "this is not a public forum, and Michael revealed nothing to his grandfather or to me. In confession, under direction from his confessor and spiritual father, he revealed something which is causing him to sin, and which is causing a rift in your family. I'm operating in the dark here, but beyond not coming to church and moving out of the house, what has Elizabeth done for which you believe Mike is giving his approval?"

My dad glared at me, but I simply remained stoic. I wondered if he was actually going to give the real reason or try to somehow obfuscate what had happened. I hadn't told Father Nicholas about the initial rape as I didn't find that information particularly relevant. Dad grimaced but didn't speak; it was my mom who finally broke the silence.

"Liz was abused four years ago by a man who was ten years older. She's living with him and plans to marry him. Mike has given her his wholehearted support. That man is working for Mr. Zhuravlyov, and I am sure Mike arranged that.

Mike is also paying for her books and tuition at the Junior College. And I believe he's planning to attend their courthouse wedding."

"Is that accurate, Michael?" Father Herman asked.

"Yes, though I think it's important to state that I do not approve of what Liz is doing."

"That's a load of crap, and you know it!" my dad growled.

"Peter, that's not helpful," Father Herman said carefully. "Mike, would you explain what you mean?"

"When Liz first told me she loved Paul and planned to marry him, I objected and tried to talk her out of it. When it became clear she was going to proceed no matter what I or my parents thought, and she made it clear that she wasn't going to come back to church, I chose to act out of love. That's why I continued to talk with Liz and to see her after she moved out.

"Did I help Paul? Absolutely. He had served time in prison for what happened with Liz, and when he was released, he went to the halfway house in Rutherford, which is run by the Methodists. Liz asked me to help him find a job. I spoke to Mr. Zhuravlyov and explained the situation, although I didn't reveal that Liz was the person Paul allegedly abused."

"Allegedly?!" my dad objected angrily. "He pled guilty to abusing her!"

"No," I said gently, "he pled guilty to statutory rape. Liz has insisted, from day one, that she loves him and that she pursued him."

"That's pure, unadulterated bull!" he said loudly.

"Peter, please relax," Father Herman pleaded. "Michael, continue, please."

"That's Liz's perspective on it," I replied softly. "She told the doctors and police how she felt. She told me. She told Emmy. And she sought out Paul when he got out of prison. Father, one thing that hasn't been said is that I'm the one who found out about Paul and turned him in to the Harding County Sheriff."

"And you're OK with this relationship now?" he asked.

I smiled softly, "Does it matter? Liz is going to do this no matter what I say or what my parents say. In my opinion, continued objection would only serve to alienate Liz, which is something I don't feel I can do. So, no, I'm not OK with it, but I love Liz, and because of that, I'm going to do anything in my power to help her. And that included helping Paul get a job and paying her tuition at Rutherford Junior College when my parents failed to do so as they had promised."

"Let's avoid any accusations, Mike," Father Nicholas said.

"Sorry, Father; Mom and Dad, I'm sorry."

"Mike, do you believe that love requires you to overlook sin?" Father Herman asked.

I shook my head, "Not at all, but I'm not sure how Liz and Paul marrying is sinful. Yes, they're 'living in sin' now, but I'm in no position to criticize Liz when I myself have been guilty of fornication in the past, something which I confessed to both you and Father Nicholas. Liz knows my opinion, but she also knows I love her unconditionally."

"You knew your parents might not come to your betrothal ceremony if you invited Liz?"

"I'm not sure what choice I had," I replied. "I invited everyone."

"Did you discuss the issue with Father Nicholas in advance?"

I shook my head, "No, because I had hoped they would demonstr...sorry, hoped they would decide to attend."

"Peter and Rachel? You couldn't find it in your heart to attend your eldest child's betrothal because your daughter was going to be there?"

"And give our approval?" my dad asked.

"You don't approve of Michael's choice of spouse?"

"That's a different question; I meant to give approval to Liz and to Mike enabling her behavior."

"Father Herman, if I may," Father Nicholas said. "Peter, is your disapproval of Mike's handling of this situation sufficient, in your mind, to prevent his ordination?"

That was the fundamental question. My own parents refusing to attend my ordination would create a significant scandal, and would create serious problems for the bishop.

"Ordination is up to the bishop, not me." my dad said, clearly indicating disapproval.

"Peter," Father Herman said, "if you boycott Mike's wedding, it will cause the bishop to question you. If you say you'll boycott Mike's ordination, you'll put the bishop in a completely untenable position and leave him unable to articulate

why he can't ordain Mike. I'm not exaggerating when I say that your father-in-law, as well as the Parish Council here, WILL want to know what happened. In fact, they will demand to know. And when the bishop can't say, everyone will assume Mike has committed some grave sin or is otherwise canonically forbidden from ordination."

"Mike can solve this immediately," my dad replied. "It's up to him."

"Father Nicholas?" Father Herman asked. "May we have this room, please?"

"Yes, of course," Father Nicholas stood.

"Michael, Rachel, would you please step outside?" Father Herman requested.

We both nodded and got up, and the three of us left the room, with Father Nicholas closing the door behind us.

"Mom, can we PLEASE put a stop to this?" I pleaded. "If Dad thinks I shouldn't be ordained as some sort of punishment for loving Liz, then I'll withdraw. I can't put the bishop in the position this is going to require."

"Your grandfather will demand answers," she sighed. "That will set him off, and he'll scorch the earth."

"Then what is it you want from me? To treat Liz as an outcast? To refuse to have anything to do with her? If the bishop got wind of that, I couldn't be ordained. And what happens when grandfather invites us to his house? We tell him we won't go because of Liz? This is insane, Mom!"

I took a deep breath and let it out, then walked to the nave. I went to the front of the church and stood before the icon of Christ and prayed the 'Jesus Prayer' over

and over -- 'O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'. About ten minutes later, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Mike?" Father Nicholas said quietly.

"Yes?"

"Why don't you go home. Let us deal with your parents, please. I apologize; Father Herman and I should have done this without you. It's really Father Herman's concern, but he wants my help."

"If you're sure."

"I am. You were put in an impossible situation and let the Holy Spirit guide your heart. That's all any of us can ever do. Go on. We'll find a way to resolve this."

"Thanks, Father."

"You're going to make an excellent Deacon, Mike. Your heart is in exactly the right place."

"It's hard to see that from where I'm standing."

"That judgment is best left to others," he said gently, "none of us ever feel worthy of the calling."

"I wonder if I've felt too good about myself since the bishop asked me to consider ordination."

"We all go through bouts of pride, but then reality crashes that party. The problem only arises when the humility and the weight of the office don't

overwhelm the pride. I was sure you wouldn't have that problem. My bigger concern was that you would refuse because you didn't feel worthy."

"Days like today make me question my worthiness."

"And there will be more days like today, both in the parish and in the hospital. Heed your calling, and respond in love. You can't go wrong doing that, even if sometimes it feels that way. Now, go on, and I'll see you back here for pre-marital counseling ninety minutes before Vespers."

"Thanks, Father."

I received his blessing, left the church, got into my car, and headed back to campus. Clarissa and Jocelyn were both in the lounge waiting for me and followed me into my room.

"You look like somebody killed your puppy," Jocelyn said.

"My dad hasn't budged from his contention that I created the problem by helping Liz."

"And your mom?"

"Is caught between my dad, Liz, and me. I got the picture she wants to find a solution, but she can't wreck her marriage. The priests recognized that my dad is the problem and they're talking to him. They sent me back here. Basically, my ordination is hanging in the balance."

"But why, Mik?"

"Because his bishop can hardly ordain him if his parents refuse to show up," Clarissa interjected. "Think about the message that would send."

"Shit," Jocelyn said. "You do nothing wrong but pay the price?"

I smiled, "I think I've read a story like that somewhere before today."

Both girls laughed.

"When are you leaving?" Clarissa asked.

"In about forty-five minutes. I'm going straight to church from Elizaveta's house because we have our first pre-marital counseling session today."

"That should be fun, given what's going on with your parents."

"Actually, the issue with my parents won't affect the wedding plans. And before you say it, even if the ordination is called off, I'm going to marry Elizaveta on May 26th of next year. I gave my word."

"You think one of us would suggest you call off the wedding?" Clarissa asked.

"I think you might ask me if I still intended to do it."

"Are you in love with her?" Jocelyn asked.

"No, but I'll learn to love her. I'm committed to doing that."

"That's the norm for arranged marriages," Clarissa observed. "I've done some reading."

"Jos," I said gently, "were you ever 'in love' with me? Or did you just love me?"

"You know the answer," she replied quietly.

"I do; we never had the 'in love' stage because we started loving each other in kindergarten, and because of that, being 'in love' was irrelevant, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Despite what I'm sure will be strong protestations from him," Clarissa said, "Mike has actually only ever been 'in love' once, and he's still in love with the same girl."

"Angie," I sighed.

"Yes. I know you love me, and I love you, but we were never in love any more than you and Jocelyn were in love. And I'm sure you remember what you said about you and Tasha."

"Head-over-heels in lust with each other," I chuckled.

"April?" Jocelyn asked.

"I thought so," I said carefully, "but in hindsight, I don't believe so. I never, ever felt about her the way I feel about Angie. I just wish there was something I could do to help Angie. And I mean, really help her. It's just sad, really, because she wants so badly to have a family. Sorry, I'm getting morose, and I don't need anything else to be down about right now."

About an hour later, I arrived at the Kozlov's house, where we had a very nice meal, and afterwards, Elizaveta and I went to Verner's for ice cream. After our ice cream, we hung out at Elizaveta's house until we had to leave for our first pre-marital counseling session with Father Nicholas. I knew as we drove, I'd need to tell her what was going on and the potential outcomes.

"You remember that we discussed the situation with Liz and Paul? That's basically what's blown up. And remember, that has to be kept between us as a couple. It can't be shared with anyone else, not even your parents."

"Of course, husband!" Elizaveta teased.

"Not yet!" I chuckled. "Betrothed. Time is moving quickly -- only seven-and-a-half months to go!"

"226 days!"

"You don't have it calculated to the minute?" I chuckled.

"I could! It's really a simple math problem, but right now days are good enough. And that's a lot!"

"Yes, but there are lots of things to do between now and then. Anyway, the basic reason my parents didn't come to our betrothal is because they're upset that I'm helping Liz."

"But she's your sister! Why would they be upset?"

"Because they don't approve of Paul, and, as we discussed, they have a good reason. I don't approve of Paul, but Liz says she loves him and wants to marry him, and she's the only one who gets to decide if that's what she wants."

"You asked my dad!" Elizaveta protested.

"Because it was the polite and respectful thing to do, AND because you're under eighteen, so I need his permission unless we wait until your eighteenth birthday. But Liz is eighteen, so my parents don't have a say. But they're angry with her and angry with me for supporting her, which they see as giving approval. For

me, it's about loving my sister and accepting that she is in control of her life, even if she makes decisions which I consider to be poor."

"I know we talked about what happened, at least a little bit, but Paul seems like a nice enough guy, though I only talked to him for a minute when he and Liz came to congratulate me."

"He is, but as I said when I first told you about this, Paul and Liz started seeing each other when she was fourteen. What I didn't tell you, and this has to remain between you and me, is that Paul was married and had a kid."

"Whoa!" Elizaveta gasped.

"Well, when I found out about it, and without thinking things through, I reported him to the Sheriff. And, as I said, that led to Paul being arrested and pleading guilty to statutory rape. Liz maintains to this day that she willingly went with Paul, and I believe her, which means that it wasn't actually rape in the sense he didn't attack her. But because the state says it's a crime, a felony, to have sex with anyone who isn't at least sixteen, Paul ended up spending two years in prison. His wife divorced him, and she received sole custody of their son. None of us knows where she is. Anyway, Liz made it clear to me that she loved Paul and asked me to help them, which I did by helping Paul find a job. As you know, they plan to marry in December."

"You could go to prison if we..."

"Yes. And that's a VERY good reason not to do anything more than kiss until we marry, leaving aside the whole problem of sin."

"So your parents are mad at Liz and are taking it out on you?"

"They're angry with Liz because she's marrying Paul; they're angry with me because I invited her to our betrothal and wedding and to my ordination. Which is where the problem lies."

"What problem?"

"If they refuse to attend my wedding and ordination, do you think Vladyka ARKADY could actually ordain me?"

"Lord have mercy! My dad will be REALLY pissed!"

"And my grandfather. And others, I'm sure. I met with my parents, Father Herman and Father Nicholas, this morning to try to resolve things. My dad won't budge on the issue; my mom is caught between my dad, me, and Liz."

"So she chose her husband over her kids?"

"I know it sounds terrible, but things with Liz and me and my mom can be repaired pretty easily; my mom's marriage is a much more difficult thing to fix if it falls apart."

"You're not upset with her?"

"I am, but I understand the position she's in."

"So what happened?" Elizaveta asked.

"Father Herman is dealing with it because he's my parents' pastor and confessor. He and Father Nicholas don't approve of what Liz is doing, but they also agree that I acted out of love for her."

"A deacon has to be loving and compassionate!"

"Very true. But, unless something changes, that's not going to happen."

"You should tell my dad."

"No, I need to let the priests handle it. My grandfather is already on my mom's case about how she's behaving, but he doesn't know the details I've told you. This situation is the first of many private things between you and me."

She put her hand on mine, which was on the shifter knob, and squeezed. That simple sign of support lifted my spirits immensely and boded well for a happy future together.

XXVII. Acceptance

October 13, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I'd like you both to fill out this worksheet," Father Nicholas said. "Please do not collaborate on the answers. It's important for me to understand our starting point. Please don't overthink this, or write down what you think I want to hear or what you think the other person wants to hear."

I scanned the worksheet before I began, something I did for every exam, quiz, or worksheet, then began with the first questions, which mostly had to do with how well I knew Elizaveta. I knew the answers to the first several questions -- her birthday, the names of her immediate family members, who her godparents were, and that she had no pets. I had no idea about her favorite color, her favorite food, or if she had allergies. Other than the girls I knew she hung out with at church, I didn't know any of her friends or who she considered her 'best' friend.

The next set of questions was about my spiritual life. How often did I go to church? How often did I expect to go as a married couple? Was I following my personal prayer and fasting rules? How important was that to me? The answers to those reflected my usual practice of attending every service and following the prayer and fasting rules which Father Nicholas had set.

Next were what I would classify as compatibility questions -- who was expected to cook, clean, do laundry, and various other household chores. For each of those, I wrote 'joint' as I truly felt that the traditional roles were outdated. It was one of my quirks -- with regard to church, I insisted on strict adherence to tradition; outside church, I was basically a modern American college student. I was sure Elizaveta would have very different answers to those questions, and for

practical purposes, as well as my own personal safety I thought mirthfully, we'd probably follow her preferences rather than mine.

With regard to number of children and timing, I wrote '2+' in the blank, and indicated that our first should be born after Elizaveta graduated from High School. My response to the question of preference for boys and girls was 'no preference', though, and I didn't write it down, I would prefer one of each if we only had two kids.

The final set of questions was about whether my family approved of our marriage when we intended to marry and why I wanted to get married. I knew the answer to 'why?' was fairly simple -- my upcoming ordination; I hoped writing that down wouldn't upset Elizaveta, even though I was reasonably sure she knew that was my immediate reason. I added that I wanted a family, including children and grandchildren, which was the long-term reason. I was tempted to write 'sex', but I wasn't sure Father Nicholas would see it the way I meant it -- humorously.

The very last question of the set was, 'If you are male, what is a wife? If you are female, what is a husband?'. I wrote out a combination of what Mr. Sokolov had said and what I had thought before I'd spoken to him -- 'A gift from God, a helpmate, and a lover, intended to make me a better man'. When I finished, I handed the worksheet to Father Nicholas, and a few seconds later, Elizaveta did the same. He quickly scanned both worksheets before speaking.

"Mike, how much have you shared with Elizaveta about the situation with your parents?"

"She knows basically everything which was revealed to Father Herman this morning and a bit more. I felt, after that meeting, as my future wife, I had to tell her and trust her to keep it secret."

"Very good. I was going to start there for exactly the reasons you just gave, but we can let that go for now. Just so you know -- when Father Herman and I left earlier, there was no resolution."

"Wonderful," I sighed.

"Let Father Herman deal with this, please."

"Yes, Father."

"I think we'll start with an easy one if you will. Elizaveta, you seem to think household chores are to be done by the wife, while Mike thinks they're to be shared."

"Mike is wrong," she replied with a smirk.

"And so it begins," I said good-naturedly.

"So," Father Nicholas said with a wry smile, "teasing aside?"

"Well," she said, "first of all, Mike is not going to have time to do those things for at least six years, not to mention I am FAR better at those things than he is!"

I chuckled, "She has a point; I can barely make a cake from a box, and my idea of 'good cooking' is hamburgers on the grill!"

"Which I will leave to him," Elizaveta teased, "because the 'caveman' has to cook his meat on an open fire!"

"Why do I get the feeling that visiting your house might become punishment?" Father Nicholas asked with a smile.

"Because I think we can both be very silly," Elizaveta said. "Though I know in public I have to behave as a proper Matushka should."

"And that's something you feel you can do?"

"Yes, of course! Before I approached Mike, I spoke to both Matushkas, Mrs. Sokolova, and both of my grandmothers."

"'Approached'," I said with a grin, "as in took me to task for not asking out any of the girls from Saint Michael and declaring how good a wife she would make!"

"So, in effect, Elizaveta, you asked Michael to marry you?" Father Nicholas asked.

"'Ordered' or 'demanded' are probably better words," I teased.

"In all seriousness, Mike, are you OK with that?"

"I don't think the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*) cares one whit if I'm OK with it or not," I grinned. "But yes, to be serious, Elizaveta made her points quite well, obviously. And yes, I'm convinced she is a good match for me."

"Because," Elizaveta said with a sly smile, "Natalya Vasilyevna told him so over a year ago!"

"Is that true, Mike?"

I nodded, "She did. When Tasha and I came to the conclusion that she would be frustrated and unhappy while I was training and that she would not be happy delaying having kids, she suggested Elizaveta, but acknowledged Elizaveta was too young at that point, at fourteen."

"And one year made the difference?" Father Nicholas asked.

"She'll be sixteen when we marry, so it's really two years, but also, the argument Elizaveta made was logical. It doesn't hurt that she's very pretty!"

Father Nicholas laughed, "No, I'm sure it doesn't! How much time are you spending together?"

"We go out together on Friday nights, and I have lunch at her house on Saturdays. I also have dinner with her father on Tuesdays, but that's at the country club, and Elizaveta and I have dinner with Tasha and Nik on Sundays. And we'll spend time with the Sokolovs as well."

"And what do you do when you go out?"

"Dinner and a movie or if nothing appropriate is playing, then we spend time at her house, under the careful supervision of her family."

Father Nicholas laughed and shook his head.

"Elizaveta," he continued, "are you happy with the amount of time you spend together now?"

"Yes, because I don't see how there could be more. Both Mike and I are in school and studying, plus we each have our friends. And, of course, we come to church."

"Mike?"

I nodded, "Yes. I think, like Elizaveta, I'd like to have more time to spend together, but circumstances don't permit it. And that's going to be the story of our lives, at least for the next six or seven years."

"And that is going to be the challenge for your marriage," Father Nicholas said. "Normally, I wouldn't propose something like this, but I think you're going to have to schedule time together. Most couples don't need to carve out time on a calendar or day book, but if you two don't do that, you'll find yourselves not spending time together. Elizaveta, do you intend to work once you graduate?"

"No! I intend to have babies!"

Father Nicholas nodded, "That's good, as long as you're both in agreement on the timing. But the reason I was asking is because I was going to suggest you arrange your schedule, including your sleeping hours, to match Mike's. Do your housework and shopping when he's in school or studying. See your friends at those times, too. And obviously, come to church together as much as possible."

"His training will interfere with church," Elizaveta said.

"Yes, it will," Father Nicholas acknowledged, "and the bishop is fully aware. We'll work around it."

"Mostly, that will be during my Residency," I said. "With clinical rotations, it's not quite as bad. Basically, the first year or two of Residency are the worst, and after that, I have some ability to choose my shifts, and I'll arrange them to be sure I can attend the maximum number of services."

"And I know that's going to happen," Elizaveta said.

"It seems as if the two of you are going into this with your eyes wide open, and that's good. I think for our next session, Elizaveta will meet with Matushka while you meet with me, Mike. In the following session, we'll begin to work on a joint prayer and fasting rule for you to work towards. Your homework for the next two weeks is to ensure you can answer all the questions on the worksheet where

you didn't know the answers. Why don't you spend the next twenty minutes together and then return for Vespers."

"Yes, Father," I said.

"Yes, Father," Elizaveta agreed.

We received his blessing and left his office, heading outside to take a walk. I took off my cassock so that we could walk hand-in-hand without causing offense to anyone who might see us.

"It's the sex talk next week, right?" Elizaveta asked.

"I would guess so," I replied.

"I just assumed you would teach me."

I chuckled, "And how much experience do I have with having periods and having babies?"

Elizaveta laughed softly, "None! You're a guy!"

"Those are things to talk with Matushka about, though I hope your mom or your grandmothers talked to you about your period, at least."

"Mom did. But you're going to be a doctor! Won't you know those things?"

"Not by the time we marry or have kids if we have them soon after you graduate! And book learning can only take you so far. If you have questions, ask Matushka Natalya or Mrs. Sokolova."

"But they're old!" she protested.

"Which means they have experience! And given that between them, they have six kids, I think they might know a thing or two about both making them and raising them! And I have a sneaking suspicion that if you tell Matushka she's old, I might have to look for a new wife!"

"Compared to me, they are! Matushka has children older than me, and Mrs. Sokolova has a granddaughter almost my age!"

"And someday we'll be their ages, still happily married, with kids and grandkids of our own! So, what's your favorite color?"

"Purple. Yours?"

"I think black is my only real choice!"

"Not what you HAVE to wear, silly!"

"Probably royal blue -- I have more shirts of that color than any, except for black. Who is your best friend?"

"At church, it's Oksana, but there's a girl, Britney, who I'm closest to. I'll invite her over so you can meet her. Yours is Clarissa, right?"

"Yes. For guys, my best friend growing up was Dale, but he moved to Wisconsin for college, and he's probably going to move to Seattle when he graduates. Here, I think it's Robby and Lee, though I'm pretty close to José and Pete. If push came to shove, I'd say Robby."

"Isn't it weird to have your best friends be a gay guy and a lesbian?"

"I don't think so. They're just like you and me. And other than telling me I'm crazy for entering into what amounts to an arranged marriage, they're fully supportive. What did your friend Britney say?"

"She thinks it's cool, but she doesn't understand why I would want to marry someone I wasn't in love with. I tried to explain that it's more important to find a person who is compatible and has the same goals and who wants to live their life in the same way I do and has the same faith I do. Grandma Yekaterina told me it's much easier to love someone than to live with them!"

"I hadn't considered that, but if you think about how many marriages end in divorce because of 'irreconcilable differences', she might have a good point. Is Britney the one who told you sex is bad?"

"No way! Britney will never do that before she's married. It was my friend Johanna."

"Which one of your friends uses kisses to control boys?"

Elizaveta laughed, "Johanna. I promised not to do that!"

"I remember."

"Besides, I really like kissing you!"

"Which concerns your parents and grandmothers quite a bit!"

"Actually, once the ring was on my finger, they relaxed. Dad pretty much will allow you to take me anywhere you wish, and my grandmothers basically think we're married."

"And her very firm 'Not yet!' the day I asked you to marry me?"

"I called you 'husband' BEFORE the ring was on my finger! Now, we could, except for how much trouble we would be in from Father Nicholas and the bishop! Speaking of that, do you think your dad will prevent you from becoming a Deacon?"

"I have no idea," I sighed. "But it's in the hands of Father Herman now, and I'll leave it to him. Well, and ultimately to Vladyka."

"I don't think it's fair."

I shrugged, "It's not about being fair; it's about what's best for the parish and the diocese."

"You should say something to my dad," Elizaveta said. "He's very close with the bishop."

"Not as close as my grandfather, who was friends with the bishop before he even became a priest! And my grandfather is already involved. My mom said he lectured her for two hours in Russian!"

"I've seen my grandfather Nikolay angry in that way! My dad is way more mellow."

"But he's a good businessman, obviously."

"He's tough but nice. That's how it was with my brothers and me. Dad is always sweet to me, but he was quite clear about following the rules and punishing violations. Really, it was Iosif, who goes by 'Joe' with his friends, who got in trouble. Mostly, he parties at school, and Dad is very unhappy about that. Gennady is a lot like my dad. Did my dad tell you Gennady is going to work for him and eventually take over the family businesses?"

"Yes, he did. I know he's studying business; what is Iosif studying?"

"Girls and beer!" Elizaveta said with a smirk. "His degree is supposed to be in civil engineering, but Dad isn't sure he's ever going to finish."

"What year is he?"

"Sophomore. He barely had a 'C' average for his Freshman year. Your sister is going to Rutherford Junior College, right?"

"Yes, studying accounting."

"And what does Paul do?"

"He's the night manager at the motel Mr. Zhuravlyov owns."

"The job you helped him get, right?"

"Yes," I replied, then checked my watch. "I need to put my cassock on and go inside."

Elizaveta squeezed my hand, kissed my cheek, and we walked back to my car so I could retrieve my cassock. I put it on, and we went into the church.



October 14, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

During announcements after the Divine Liturgy on Sunday morning, Father Nicholas said that Nikolas Antipov had an announcement to make. It came as no surprise when Nik announced he had asked Tasha to marry him and that their

wedding was planned for July 21st. I looked over to Tasha, and she smiled and lifted her hand to show a modest diamond ring on her left hand. I was also not surprised when Father Nicholas stated that they would have the betrothal and wedding one after the other on the 21st.

Once Father Nicholas dismissed the congregation, and everyone kissed the hand cross which he held and partook of the *antidoron* and warm, diluted wine, Tasha was surrounded by the girls and women of the church. It was a good ten minutes before I had a chance to congratulate her and Nikolas, and then Elizaveta and I went to the church hall for lunch. After I taught Sunday School, Elizaveta and I headed directly to Tasha's apartment so we could spend the afternoon with Tasha and Nikolas.

"I'm glad you picked the day you did for the wedding," I said after Tasha greeted us at the door.

We walked inside and greeted Nikolas.

"I checked with Clarissa on your plans," Tasha continued, "because we really want you there. That also gives Nikolas time to find a job in Columbus, Dayton, or Cincinnati."

"Nik," I asked, "have you started looking for a job?"

"I will after Christmas break," he replied. "Nobody is hiring for next June just yet. The recruiters will be on campus starting in February. Did you hear about medical school?"

"Not yet. We're hoping to hear from McKinley this week or next."

"Have you decided where you'll live, Tasha?" Elizaveta asked.

"No, because it depends on where Nik finds a job. If it's in Columbus, we'll probably find a place near Milena and Joel. If it's in Cincinnati or Dayton, then probably in Rutherford. I think I know a pharmacy where I could work if that happens!"

I flashed a silly smile and asked, "You think your dad will hire you?"

"What do you think my mother would say if he refused?"

"I'm not sure I'd be worried about what she'd say; it's what she'd do that would worry me! And I'd want to be outside the blast radius!"

"Exactly!" Tasha exclaimed with a smile. "Did you book your trip to Niagara Falls?"

"Yes," I replied. "I found a nice, cozy motel not too far away that caters to newlyweds. We'll drive up on Monday after the wedding and come back on Friday. Then, eight days later, we leave for Europe."

"Where are you going?" Nikolas asked.

"Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid, Rome, Athens, Vienna, Geneva, Munich, Copenhagen, and London. We'll travel by train and stay in youth hostels, though, in Paris, we have four nights in a very nice hotel courtesy of Lara Federova. Have you two decided on a honeymoon?"

"There's a very nice place I found in the Catskill Mountains in New York," Nikolas said. "Basically, where we can go to be away from everyone for a week."

'And screw each other silly', which was left unsaid. I had no idea what kind of experience Nikolas had, but he was certainly going to have quite the experience on his wedding night, if my first weekend with Tasha was any indication.

"Waiting until July is most practical," he continued, "because I can start work on June 10th, which the placement office says would be a fairly common start date."

"Mischa, will you have time for these dinners once medical school starts?" Tasha asked.

"We should. Clarissa, Sandy, and I will need to work out our study schedule, but Elizaveta and I agreed we want to continue these Sunday dinners."

After a nice afternoon and a very good dinner, I took Elizaveta home, then headed back to campus for study group. When I got to my room, there was a note on my board stating my mom had called and that I should call her back. I went into my room, shut the door, and dialed my parents' house.

"It's Mike," I said when my mom answered.

"Hi. I just wanted to let you know we'll be at your wedding and ordination."

"I'm glad to hear that, but are we going to talk about this situation?"

"Your father only grudgingly agreed to come to your wedding and ordination."

"And you? Can we at least TALK about it, even if you have to act in a way that keeps the peace with Dad?"

"You still don't see that you've done anything wrong?"

I suppressed a sigh, "You're equating acting out of love with giving my approval. They aren't the same thing. I told Liz I didn't approve, and she knows I don't approve. I was faced with a stark choice -- love my sister or cut her off completely. I chose to love her. She's not going to change her mind about this

either way, so what Dad is doing isn't going to matter one bit. Let me be very direct -- Liz is not interested in your approval. Cutting her off will only harden her resolve. Dad is actually working against himself here."

"So you think we should just give up on our principles?"

"Not at all. You live by yours. I live by mine. Liz lives by hers. She's an adult, Mom, and that means she gets to make her own decisions, good OR bad. I'm an adult, and I suspect you aren't going to agree with all of my decisions. In fact, I know that to be the case because you disagree with my decision on how to deal with Liz. As adults, Liz and I get to decide how to live our lives, not you and Dad. Would you agree to Grandpa having control over YOUR life? You sure didn't in High School!"

"That's..." she began to reply.

"Different?" I asked, completing her thought. "You mean when Grandpa didn't approve of the young man you were running around with?"

She was quiet, and I thought maybe, just perhaps, I'd made a bit of headway. I didn't say anything further, allowing the silence to indicate I felt she was trapped by what amounted to a 'do as I say, not as I do' situation. That wasn't quite true for my dad, who had basically been a 'goody two-shoes' in High School, just as I had. He'd been one until he met my mom, to be precise, something about which I was sure she was thinking.

"You do realize there is a difference between what I did in High School and what Liz did in High School."

"Of course. But we're not talking about that. We're talking about what she's doing now. I truthfully don't think this is rebellion; I believe she loves Paul. I believe, against my own instincts, that he loves her, too."

"How can you say that?"

"From the way he's treated her since he was released from prison and from how he's behaved in general. If he didn't love her, why go back with her? If he's some sort of degenerate, why isn't he preying on other girls?"

"How do you know he isn't?"

"His parole would be revoked in a second if he had ANYTHING to do with girls who were underage. One of the conditions is he has nothing to do with anyone under eighteen except in the course of normal activities, like where they're a clerk in a store or whatever. And he has to report anything more than incidental contact to his parole officer or face going back to prison to serve out the rest of his term."

"Just how involved in this ARE you?"

"When I met with the director of the halfway house, they explained the rules, and Paul himself told me about the rules."

"Mike, you're hiding the truth. Paul got out of prison before Liz turned eighteen and before she moved out of the house. And he had the job before her birthday."

She was right, but I didn't want to reveal too much, especially the fact that Liz had communicated with Paul while he was in prison.

"Liz knew when Paul would get out and asked me to help him find a job."

"Before she turned eighteen?"

"Yes. But Liz absolutely didn't see him until after she moved out of the house. That's the absolute truth."

"If you tried to talk her out of it BEFORE you helped Paul, then she was already thinking it!"

"Mom, she was thinking that when Paul was arrested! And you and I talked about it when we talked about the restrictions you had put on Liz which was right around the end of my Freshman year at Taft. And it wasn't too long after that when I told Liz I had major problems with cheating, and that was my real concern with Paul. I also told her that no matter what she decided, I'd love her and never abandon her.

"Liz being in love with Paul can't be news to you. Liz finding out when Paul was going to be released shouldn't surprise you. Liz asking me to help Paul get a job also shouldn't really surprise you. And me helping her shouldn't surprise you either. Can you seriously tell me you didn't see this coming? And do you seriously think any of us could have prevented Liz from being with Paul?"

"Why didn't you come to us?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! I just reminded you that we discussed this more than two years ago! You disapprove. I get it. Now, what are we going to do to put the family back together?"

"Your father..."

"Is who he is. Right now, the first thing to do is for you to talk to Liz. That's where it starts. I'm sure Father Herman said something similar. Please just call her and talk to her. Don't try to change her mind; just talk to her. Please."

Once again, there was silence, and I simply waited for the two minutes which passed before Mom spoke again.

"I'll call her. Do you have her number?"

"Yes. And, Mom? Please be nice. And please listen. Do you have a pen?"

"Yes."

I gave her the number, reminded her once again to be nice and to listen, and then we said 'goodbye'. I hung up and immediately dialed Liz's phone number. Paul answered and put Liz on the phone.

"Mom is going to call you," I said. "You have to be polite and listen to what she has to say."

"So I can get a lecture? What if I don't want to talk to her?"

I suppressed a sigh, "You'll do it for me. They agreed to come to my wedding and ordination. Mom and I had an OK talk just now, and she agreed to call you. Father Herman and Father Nicholas are involved, and both of them are pushing Mom and Dad to resolve this. So just bite your tongue and let her have her say. I asked her to listen to you as well."

"Fat chance that'll happen."

"If it doesn't, we'll know we're wasting our time, and I'll report what you tell me to Father Nicholas and Father Herman. You know Grandpa isn't taking this lying down, and I guarantee you neither will Mr. Kozlov. Just be polite, listen, don't swear, and let her have her say. If she listens to you, then have a discussion, not an argument."

"I'm not you, Mikey!"

"I know!" I chuckled. "But do your best, please? For me?"

"I'll try."

"She's probably going to try to get you to admit you were in touch with Paul before you turned eighteen. She suspects that's the case because Paul got out before your birthday, and I helped him get the job before then. I told her you knew when Paul was getting out of prison and that she knew years ago you were in love with him. I'd just reiterate that you didn't see him before you moved to Rutherford and avoid anything else."

"It really isn't any of her business."

"Actually, that's about me, not about you."

"Huh?"

"She's looking for a scapegoat, and I'm the only convenient one. I don't really care, except that if they can prove you communicated with Paul, then Dad will certainly go to the Sheriff or Prosecutor because you were under eighteen. It's important that you stick to the facts about not seeing him or talking to him until after you moved to McKinley."

"Did Mom ever tell you that we got a letter saying Paul was being released?"

"No! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't think it mattered. Basically, they had to notify me as the 'victim' even though Paul never attacked me or hurt me."

"Then use that to say how you knew when he would get out. Did it say anything else?"

"That he'd be sent to the halfway house in Rutherford."

"You know, Lizard Breath, that information would have been helpful."

"Sorry."

"I'm curious: why did Mom and Dad let you see that letter?"

"It was addressed to me, so I opened it when I arrived home from school. They got one, too, addressed to them."

"OK. That's going to make a big difference. Mom conveniently didn't tell me about it. Granted, I'm not telling her everything I know, either, but still! Anyway, talk to her and call me afterwards, OK?"

"Yes."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up and went to the lounge to join the study group.



October 16, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday morning, after breakfast, I took my car to the Ford dealer to have it serviced. I went to the Service Manager's desk and let him know that Viktor Kozlov had instructed me to bring the car in and handed over the keys. He picked up the phone, put it in PA mode, and called for Zach Gleason to come to the desk.

"Hi, Mike," Zach said, extending his hand, which I took.

"Hi, Zach. Mr. Kozlov said I should bring the car in for a check-up."

"He told me you'd be bringing it by. Let me have the keys, and I'll get started right away. If you go inside to the reception desk, they'll get you back to campus in the courtesy car. Let them know when to come back for you; I'll be done by noon, and you can pick it up any time after that."

"Cool. Thanks. I hear things are going well."

"This is what I was meant to do, not study chemistry and biology! I see you got married. Angie?"

I shook my head, "I'm engaged, but not to Angie. The Russian Orthodox tradition is for both the man and woman to wear an engagement ring."

"Who?"

"A girl from church," I said with a grin.

"That girl back home?"

"No, one from the church in McKinley. We're getting married right after graduation. It's Elizaveta, Viktor's daughter."

"Wow! Cool! Congrats! Let me get to work on the car."

"Thanks again!"

We shook hands, and he took the keys from the Service Manager while I went into the showroom. I went to the desk and let the pretty blonde know I needed a

courtesy ride to campus. She made a phone call, and a few minutes later, I climbed into the passenger seat of a Ford LTD. The young man driving introduced himself as Rudy, and as soon as I buckled my seat belt, he put the car into 'Drive' and we headed back to campus. When we arrived, I thanked him and asked to be picked up at 3:00pm.

"How's Zach?" Sandy asked when I walked into the lounge.

"He seems pretty happy," I replied. "Not like when he was here."

"Coffee then Analytical Chem lab?" Clarissa asked.

"Even more mass-spec," I replied. "Let me get my books so we don't have to come back to the dorm."

The girls went to get their books as well, and then we headed to the Student Union, which had improved their coffee selection while keeping the price reasonable. We had our coffee, then headed to the lab, where we spent ninety minutes analyzing various samples in the mass spectrometer and filling out data sheets. When we finished, we headed back to the dorm and met up with most of the gang for lunch.

After lunch, we worked on our lab report until 3:00pm, when I went downstairs to meet Rudy so he could take me to get my car. When we arrived, I thanked him then went to the Service Desk. The Service Manager handed me my keys, said there were no charges, and then called Zach to talk to me about what he'd done -- a tune-up, an oil change, tire rotation, a front-end alignment, and a road test. Overall, he felt the car was in very good shape, considering the mileage and that it was almost nine years old. I thanked him, then headed back to campus for a few hours before meeting Viktor Kozlov at the country club for dinner.

"I'm concerned about the situation with your parents," Viktor said.

"Along with a host of others, including Father Herman, Father Nicholas, my grandfather, and the Sokolovs," I replied. "Last night, my mom called to say she and my dad would be at the wedding and my ordination."

"So everything is resolved?"

"Not by any stretch of anyone's imagination, but the immediate concern is resolved. Father Nicholas instructed me to let Father Herman deal with the situation."

"That sounds as if you are blameless."

"I wouldn't go that far," I replied, "and as I said, I spoke to my mom last night, and the priests are handling it."

"Then I'll leave it be. I heard you had your car in for service today."

"I did; thank you."

"You bought it used?"

"Yes. And my friend Nate back home took tender loving care of it for me."

"Zach said that showed -- it was well maintained, and you've kept meticulous records of maintenance."

"I knew the car had to last through medical school and Residency, so I've made sure it's had the attention it needed. It's never let me down!"

"Do you follow racing at all?"

"No."

"An up-and-coming Ford driver named Bill Elliott won a race at Charlotte Motor Speedway about a week ago. I usually get tickets for the race in Michigan if that interests you. You could even meet him."

"I'm not really interested. I've watched the Indy 500 on TV, and it's OK. I saw a NASCAR race once on TV, but it didn't really interest me all that much."

"I'm not a big racing fan, but Michigan is Ford's home track, so there are always social events where I can make good contacts. If you happen to change your mind, let me know."

We had a nice meal, and afterwards, I headed back to campus for a study group. When I arrived, I found a note asking me to please call my sister. I went into my room and dialed her number, and she answered.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"You were right about her trying to find out if there was any contact between Paul and me, but I just kept pointing out that she knew how I felt and that we got those letters."

"And?"

"I didn't yell or swear, but Jesus, Mikey, she's gone completely around the bend."

"Actually, I don't think so. I think her problem is that she's in a very difficult situation, and there is no easy way she can extricate herself from it. She loves Dad and wants to stay married, so she has to walk a very fine line. Remember, we talked about that when I told you she'd come around, but that it would be difficult. What did she say?"

"I got a lecture about him cheating on his wife and the fact that he is a child abuser. I wasn't a kid, Mikey! I was a woman! I had my period, my boobs, and hair in the most interesting place!"

"Too much information!" I declared firmly.

"Jesus, Mikey! You're going to be a doctor in just over four years!"

"And you're *still* going to be my sister!"

"You just need to chill about that stuff. Anyway, Paul isn't interested in anyone else. When I first flirted with him, he thought I was sixteen, which is older than Elizaveta!"

"I tried that tack with Mom, and she basically rejected it because, in her mind, the circumstances are different."

"You aren't screwing," Liz said flatly.

"There's a big difference between adultery and fooling around with someone who is single. As for Elizaveta and me, I am not at all interested in a personal repeat of Paul's experience. Not to mention having to go to confession."

I couldn't see it over the phone, but I could *feel* Liz rolling her eyes.

"I know you care about that, but seriously, letting someone control your life in that way?"

"My choice, Liz. Remember that. Have I told you to live your life that way?"

"You want me to go back to church."

"Yes, I do. But I'd never force you to do that; it has to be your choice and a result of you allowing the Holy Spirit to work on your heart. I choose to accept the restrictions placed on me, and you know how much I've struggled with that."

"But why not just do what you want to do?!"

"I AM doing what I want to do! I'm not perfect, but I'm trying. Just as I accept you making your own choices and having to live your own life, you need to accept me doing the same thing. And that's what I've tried to get across to Mom -- she needs to accept that you're an adult and free to make your own decisions, even if she disagrees with them. I told Mom that I'd told you I didn't approve or agree, which is true. But I also said I accepted that it's not my life, and as such, I can't decide how it's lived. How did you leave things with Mom?"

"We're going to have lunch on Friday."

"Is she telling Dad?"

"I doubt it."

"It's a start, Liz. Be nice, talk with her, and let her come to a place where she can accept reality. Then she and Father Herman can work on Dad. Elizaveta and I are going to Milford on Saturday to see Doctor Mercer. We're going to stop in and see Angie. We'll stop in and see you if you want, and if Father Nicholas and Father Herman agree, stop in and see Mom and Dad. We'll probably go to Vespers at Holy Transfiguration."

"What time on Saturday?"

"How about breakfast? Do you and Paul still do that?"

"Yes. That'll work."

"See you then."

"Thanks, Mikey. I love you."

"I love you, too, Liz!"

We said 'goodbye', and after I hung up, I went to join the study group.

XXVIII. Together

October 18, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday, Clarissa, Sandy, and I had our fifth and final interviews in Pittsburgh. It followed the same basic pattern as the other four. Each of the schools -- McKinley, OSU, UC, Indiana, and Pittsburgh had something to recommend itself. The girls and I discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each of the four schools besides McKinley, and decided, if we all didn't get into McKinley, our order of choices would be UC, Indiana, Pittsburgh, and then OSU.

Any school other than McKinley would require making alternate living arrangements for Elizaveta and me, as well as sorting out finishing High School for Elizaveta. Clarissa wouldn't be able to live at Doctor Blahnik's house, either. Pete had applied to Master's programs in each city, and so long as he got into a program in the same city as our medical school, he'd be fine. If that didn't happen, it would create a potential issue for him and Sandy. The obvious hope was that we'd all be accepted at McKinley.

When we arrived back on campus, we all checked our mailboxes and were disappointed to find no letters from any of the schools, and headed upstairs to hang out in my room. I put on some music, and over the next hour, most of our friends trickled in.

"Do we get to throw you a bachelor party?" Robby asked.

"So long as it doesn't get TOO out of hand," I replied.

"Strippers?" Sophia asked with a smirk.

"Probably a bad idea," I replied.

"Got it," Lee grinned. "Cancel the Chippendales!"

Everyone laughed except for Kimiko. Brandon leaned over to whisper in her ear, and she smiled knowingly. They'd been spending more time together, but given her complete aversion to any kind of public display of affection, there was no way, without prying, to know if they were dating. I still helped her occasionally with homework, but she and a small group of Sophomores had their own study group.

"What about alcohol?" Robby asked.

"No problem for me if you guys want to have booze there, but remember, the rules changed."

Robby frowned, "America -- we're drafting your sorry butt into the Army so you can be killed by some other sorry draftee from some God-forsaken country, but heaven forbid we let you have a beer before you die! What a country!"

"You don't have anything to worry about," Clarissa smirked. "They don't take gays!"

"That wasn't exactly my point," Robby grinned, "but I won't complain."

"You wouldn't defend your country?" Pete asked.

"If it was invaded? Sure. But dying in Viet Nam or Grenada or wherever? No way. I had an uncle who died in Viet Nam, and for what?"

"I suppose that's a reasonable position," Pete said. "But Clarissa's right, you'd be rejected for being gay. Mike, what would you do?"

"Conscientious Objector status, and ask for a non-combat position. In a couple of years, I'd be a medic or doctor, so I probably wouldn't have to even voice the objection, though I would on principle. It's also possible I'd be a chaplain. I wouldn't be able to serve in any combat role because a clergyman who causes a death is pretty much automatically laicized. That's why our bishops don't drive their own cars. Even an accidental death causes a significant problem."

"You're serious?" Jocelyn asked. "A situation like my accident would lead to your bishop being removed or whatever?"

"Yes. It removes all doubt in the minds of the faithful. It's the same point with a soldier who kills while serving his country, not receiving Eucharist for a year."

"And if a patient dies at your hands? Not because you've done anything wrong, mind you, but because of their injuries or whatever?"

"I spoke with the bishop about that, and a deacon who is also a physician is dealt with by «ekonomia», and the faithful understand that. Now, if, as a doctor, I was found to have intentionally caused a death or acted with extreme negligence, I'd lose my license AND be laicized. Generally, priests are not physicians, though I know of one in Toledo who is. I believe he's an orthopedist, which means it's pretty tough to have anything happen that would present a problem."

"But if Father Nicholas were involved in a fatal traffic accident?" Clarissa asked.

"Barring some kind of extreme «ekonomia», he'd have to be laicized. Let's just say that there are far bigger risks."

"Cheating?"

I chuckled, "In either case -- Father Nicholas or me -- I don't think we'd live long enough to be laicized."

Everyone laughed.

"Russian women seem to lay down the law pretty firmly," José said. "And make it stick!"

"They aren't the ONLY ones!" Sarah said menacingly, causing more laughter.

"Did you guys hear anything at all yet?" Sophia asked.

"No," Sandy replied. "Nothing in our mailboxes today. And you know we just interviewed in Pittsburgh this morning."

"Robby mentioned the bachelor party," Lara said. "Is someone doing a bridal shower for Elizaveta?"

"Ask Mrs. Sokolova," I replied. "She's the one who'll know what the plans are. But you might want to consider a secular one to go along with whatever the ladies at church do. I'm sure the men at church will arrange something, and most likely the night before. Robby, I'd suggest Friday night."

"Think Doctor Blahnik will let the guys have our party at her house?" Lara asked.

"Probably," I replied. "Just ask her. And please make sure Milena, Joel, Liz, Paul, and Emmy get invitations to the appropriate party."

"Any plans for the rest of the day?" Jocelyn asked.

"None that I'm aware of except studying tonight."

We spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing, then had dinner in the cafeteria, and after dinner, we did our homework and studied.



October 19, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday afternoon, after analytical chemistry, I found a letter in my mailbox from UC, accepting me into their program. It wasn't the one I wanted to find, but it meant I was in medical school, no matter what. Clarissa also received a letter from UC, but Sandy didn't.

"Well, that sucks," Sandy sighed as we got into the elevators.

"I wouldn't read anything into it at this point," Clarissa said. "All five medical schools said it could be early February before we heard anything. We were hoping it would be now, and really, I'm surprised none of us heard from McKinley."

"Same here," I replied. "That's the one I expected first."

"What will you do if we all get into UC and not McKinley?" Sandy asked.

"The biggest problem would be with Elizaveta finishing High School. Obviously, she could switch schools, but anywhere besides McKinley complicates things."

"And with church, too."

"I know, but I fully expect we'll all get into McKinley."

"You have your date tonight, right?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes."

"Friday is a bad day for that, isn't it?"

"It can be, but Chinese is perfectly fine, and we're OK with shrimp for protein. Also, please don't forget Elizaveta and I are going to Milford tomorrow to see Doctor Mercer."

"That ought to be interesting," Clarissa observed with a slight smile.

"You mean because Doctor Mercer doesn't approve?"

"Exactly."

"I think that's a good thing because she's going to point out all the potential pitfalls, and that will help us address anything which might arise in the future. Do you really think either of us will change our minds?"

"No, of course not! But that doesn't mean it won't be interesting!"

"Let's go hang out until it's time for your date."

Clarissa, Sandy, and I went up to my room, where I put on *Purple Rain*, and we relaxed. Other friends came in and out over the two hours, including Melody, who had news.

"He finally agreed!" she declared. "He tried to put a ton of conditions on the debate, but we rejected most of them."

"What's the plan?"

"It'll be held here, in the main auditorium, on November 3rd at 1:00pm. It'll be a crossfire debate where you each give some kind of introduction, then one asks a question of the other, and there is a response and a rebuttal, which can involve back and forth. Then you switch. Each of you can ask up to ten questions."

"Do they have to be submitted in advance?" I asked.

"No."

"That should be interesting," I chuckled. "Fundamentally, he can't ask me a 'gotcha' question because there are none. I, on the other hand, have quite a few I can ask him. One question -- which Bible are we using?"

"He said he'll only debate using the NIV."

I shook my head, "That's a badly translated version and purposefully corrupts the Scripture. Not only that, it's incomplete."

"Incomplete?"

"Incomplete. There are 10 books Protestants call 'Apocryphal', which some Protestant groups dropped from the Old Testament in the 16th Century, as well as some not used by the Western Church. The 1611 King James Version contained some, but not all of them. Those books we continue to use are more properly called the 'Deuterocanon'. One of my key points would be about that. In fact it's a key point which undermines his entire claim. I can't agree if you've tied my hands that way because I need to be able to use MY Bible, which, as I've said, is different from his."

"Shit!" Melody exclaimed. "I let him trap me!"

"Did you at least leave an out that Mike had to agree to the terms?" Clarissa asked.

"I assumed Mike would be OK with pretty much anything. I fucked up pretty badly. I assumed the Bible was the Bible."

"The Roman Catholics have a slightly different configuration, but it's very, very close to ours, which is, of course, older. I'm sure Reverend Saddler knew that, and that's why he insisted on the NIV."

"Is there a specific thing you can point out that is purposefully mistranslated?"

"Yes. One important example is that whenever the Greek word «παράδοσεις» (*paradosis*) is used in a negative sense, it's translated 'traditions', and whenever it's used in a positive sense, it's translated 'teachings'. They do add footnotes which say '*or traditions*' but most people likely miss that, and more importantly, if you use a concordance, it'll ONLY show you negative use of the word 'tradition'. It's intellectually dishonest and intended to purposefully deceive."

"Mike," Sandy said, "I'm no expert, but isn't that a way to completely disarm him? In other words, make that your FIRST point, and that gives you your segue."

"Ambush him!" Melody exclaimed. "Don't protest; just come out with guns blazing and destroy his argument in the first five minutes."

I nodded, "And then point out that books were removed. I know he'll be prepared for the 'by faith alone' point and the 'sheep and the goats' point, but I doubt he'll be prepared for this because he thinks he won by picking his Bible version. Fine. I'll do it."

"Thanks," Melody replied. "I messed up, and I'm sorry."

"You're forgiven. Just play it cool, though. Did you at least ensure he can't fill the auditorium with his people?"

"That was one concession I wouldn't give. He only gets 10% of the tickets. The rest are for students on campus. I wouldn't budge on that one because it was obvious what he was trying to do."

"What other conditions?"

"No liturgical clothing."

I laughed, "Perfect. He can't wear a business suit."

"What?"

"That's his liturgical clothing. I'm going to wear a tie. He's not allowed because that's required for his church services. If he gets to wear a tie, I get to wear my cassock. Period."

"He'll flip!"

"Don't tell him!" Clarissa said. "When he arrives, Mike objects that he's wearing his 'preaching clothes'."

I shook my head, "No. Tell him in advance. The other way makes it look like a setup. Tell him no jacket or sport coat and no tie."

"What do I say if he objects?"

"That if he can wear his uniform, so can I."

"What point are you trying to make, Mike?" Sandy asked.

"Just to make a point," I replied. "I'll make a point about him doing a liturgy, too. Melody, do you think you can get me an order of service from his church?"

"Sure. It's in the bulletin they publish. I actually have one."

"Perfect. And now, I need to shower and dress for my date. Make all the arrangements, Mel."

"Thanks, Mike. And thanks for finding a way around my screw-ups."

"Don't worry about it!"

Everyone left, and I showered, dressed, and headed to Elizaveta's house. I rang the bell, and when she answered, I went inside to greet her dad, then Elizaveta and I left for the Chinese Restaurant.

"Clarissa and I received acceptance letters to UC today."

"That's good!" Elizaveta replied. "But it's not the one we want!"

"But, it means I'm in medical school for sure, which is the major hurdle. Every other problem can be solved one way or the other! I'm sure we'll hear from McKinley soon."

"What time will you pick me up tomorrow?"

"6:00am. We'll stop for breakfast in Rutherford with Liz and Paul as we planned."

"Are we going to see your parents?"

"Yes, though we won't stay too long. We'll be back here for Vespers."

"OK. Did anything ever happen with that Protestant preacher?"

"Yes. Melody finally set things up. It will be on November 3rd at 1:00pm. Would you like to be there?"

"To see you mop the floor with him?! Yes!"

"You have a lot of confidence in me."

"First of all, you're going to be my husband. Second, I've heard you teach Sunday School, so I'm sure you have the answers. And third, the Holy Spirit is with you, not him!"

"We'll need to eat early on that Saturday if that's possible."

"Of course it is! I'll plan the meal for 11:00am."

We had a very nice dinner at the Chinese restaurant, and because there was nothing playing at the movies we wanted to see, we went for ice cream and then back to Elizaveta's house to spend some time together.



October 20, 1984, Milford & Cincinnati, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I picked up Elizaveta as planned, and we drove to Rutherford for breakfast with Liz and Paul. Liz had had lunch with Mom the day before and said that it had gone OK, at least in the sense that there was no yelling or screaming. Mom hadn't come to terms with the situation, but based on what Liz said and my conversation with Mom, I felt we were making a bit of progress.

After breakfast, Elizaveta and I headed to Milford for our first pre-marital counseling session with Doctor Mercer.

"Good morning!" Doctor Mercer said when we walked into her office.

"Good morning, Doctor Mercer," I replied, shutting the door. "This is Elizaveta Kozlova, my fiancée."

"Nice to meet you, Elizaveta," Doctor Mercer said. "Please, both of you, sit down."

We sat in the comfortable leather chairs which faced Doctor Mercer's desk.

"Actually, now that I think about it, Mike, would you mind if I spoke with Elizaveta alone?"

She had reassured me when I confirmed the appointment that her goal was not to stop us but to help us, despite her serious misgivings about Elizaveta's age. I'd suggested to Elizaveta that what Doctor Mercer was proposing was likely to occur, so she was prepared for it.

"No," I replied, "I don't mind so long as Elizaveta is OK with it."

"It's OK, Doctor Mercer," Elizaveta said. "Mike mentioned that you might want to talk to me alone."

I got up from the chair and left the office, closing the door behind me. I sat down in the waiting room and scanned the magazines on the table. I picked up the latest edition of *Time*, which had a cover story about a crackdown on the Mafia and flipped through the pages, looking for interesting articles to read. I found one about Richard Miller, an FBI Agent who had been arrested a few weeks earlier on espionage charges. He'd allegedly conspired with two Russian

immigrants, Svetlana and Nikolai Ogorodnikov, to provide classified documents in exchange for money. I couldn't imagine any of my immigrant friends or family countenancing such a thing, let alone doing it.

I finished that article, then read one about how Gillette was giving up on selling a disposable lighter which had failed to dethrone the Bic disposable, which was the only one I'd ever seen in the Quick Mart or Kroger. They were selling their lighter to another company which would take over production. I was just about to start reading an article about the Soviet space station when the door to Doctor Mercer's office opened, and Elizaveta waved for me to come in. I put the magazine down, got up, and went into the office, closing the door behind me, and retook my seat.

"I think what I'd like to do is begin with problem-solving strategies. I'm sure you've heard the advice 'never go to bed angry', well, I'd like to modify that and work to ensure you don't get angry in the first place. There is going to be severe pressure on your relationship while Mike is studying and doing his Residency, and that has the potential to turn even minor disagreements into major ones.

"Residency presents a special problem because of the schedule, so I think we'll leave that for the future. Right now, I'd like to suggest that in addition to scheduling private time together, you also schedule what I would call 'troubleshooting' sessions. And that's when you set aside some time to sit down and honestly talk to each other about anything that's bothering you, or adding additional stress, or you think is creating division. You can do this as a couple or invite someone to work with you -- your pastor, your sponsors, or someone like me.

"You don't want to do it at meals, or while you're doing chores, or while you're driving for a date night. This needs to be quiet time, which, in your case, probably starts and ends with whatever prayer is appropriate. Make sure you allow enough time to really talk things through. It doesn't have to be daily or

weekly, but I would suggest twice a month, though if problems arise, they should be dealt with quickly."

We had a forty-minute discussion about how to talk to each other, with the main advice being to carefully listen and ask questions to ensure we understood each other. Doctor Mercer also focused on the necessity to compromise, looking me directly in the eyes when she did so, making clear to me that I was going to have to do most of the work to find the correct balance based on Elizaveta's needs. When we finished, she asked to speak privately with me, so Elizaveta went to the waiting area.

"I still have my reservations because of Elizaveta's age," Doctor Mercer said, "but I'm convinced nobody pressured her into this marriage, except perhaps your bishop and that was only indirectly by his wish to ordain you as soon as possible, and not directed specifically at Elizaveta. She seems well-adjusted, intelligent, and mature for her age. And finally, I think her expectations are set correctly due to her talks with the other clergy wives and the doctor's wife. That said, she does seem to think marriage means sex every night."

"Darn," I replied with a smirk.

"Smart aleck," Doctor Mercer replied with a wry smile. "She appears to have had acceptable sex education, but she has a fairly innocent way of thinking about it. As you and I have discussed, sex ed barely scratches the surface of what is possible, and you were fairly naïve until you were with Jocelyn."

"True."

"Just remember that."

"I haven't developed any strange fetishes or kinks, Doc," I grinned.

Doctor Mercer laughed.

"Sorry for the laugh," she said, "but I was thinking about the first time we spoke. Even though you had been with Jocelyn, Emmy, Becky, and Nancy, you were still fairly naïve."

"I wouldn't argue with you if you said that was still true!"

"Actually, I think that changed after you spoke with your gay friends about their sex life, and you had a threesome."

"Which doesn't mean I'm well-versed in fetishes or kinks!"

"Will you just stop!" Doctor Mercer said, but she was laughing. "The fact that you're smirking and not blushing tells a very different story. You blushed, at least mildly, when you and I talked that first time."

"I was still fairly clueless then."

"How much did you tell Elizaveta?"

"Just that I had some experience. She assumes, correctly, that I slept with Tasha. I just left it at that. Tasha told her fiancé she wasn't a virgin, and once he climbed down off the ceiling, he assumed, correctly, it was me. It's in both Tasha's and my best interests to allow our future spouses to believe that was what happened, and only that happened."

"The only concern I have there is that revelation in the future could cause significant problems and hurt Elizaveta very badly. I'm not one for lies, but if you simply let her assume that's the case, you have to make sure none of your friends spill the beans. If you can't do that, and I think given the rough number

I'm aware of, it's going to be difficult, you should at least tell her you were with someone other than Tasha."

"Doesn't that open a whole can of worms, though?" I asked. "At that point, knowing how smart and logical she is, she'll ask me how many. If I tell her, I suspect that'll be the end of it."

"It's an interesting dilemma and one which really only occurs when one partner believes sex is only for marriage, with no exceptions, and the other doesn't. There used to be the notion that it was OK for the guy to have experience, but not the girl, but that kind of went away after the 50s. And I'm just talking social mores here, not religious teaching. How do you feel about your sexual history?"

"I'm responsible for what I did -- nobody tricked me or coerced me into doing what I did. I confessed to my priest and received absolution, and I've committed to remain chaste until marriage. So, to paraphrase the prayer of absolution, I have no further care for the sins which I have committed."

"So you start over with a blank slate, as it were?"

"I'll leave the guilt to you, Doc; you're Jewish!"

Doctor Mercer shook her head and laughed softly.

"That does seem to be the one thing my mother and grandmother both passed to me. In all seriousness, you don't feel guilty or dirty or anything of that sort?"

"No," I replied. "I made mistakes, I learned from them, confessed my sin, received absolution, and now I'm moving forward. I confessed to Elizaveta that I wasn't a virgin in case that was going to be a problem, and while she wasn't happy, she did comment that having an experienced husband might make things better."

"Let's just say she's VERY curious about sex, which is true of most fifteen-year-old girls. One other piece of advice -- you're going to be living with her parents, more or less, and you need to do your best to not let her mom run your marriage."

"You do realize that there is no force in the universe which can withstand a «бабушка» (*babushka*)?!"

"My Russian grandmother being a prime example," Doctor Mercer said with a wan smile. "That said, if you see that happening, you need to get help from your pastor or Elizaveta's father, or you'll find your mother-in-law controlling every aspect of your married life with no reasonable way to escape."

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied.

"I'll see you both in a month if that works?"

"Sure. Would the Saturday before Thanksgiving work?"

"Yes. I'll see you both on the 17th, then," she said, noting it on her calendar. "How are things at home?"

"A slight crack in the wall," I replied. "We're going to stop in and see my parents on the way home after we see Angie."

"With your parents, I'll leave that to your priests for now, but you're welcome to talk to me if you wish. As for Angie, I believe she's prepared, but please don't be surprised if she cries or seems depressed. I already have plans to speak to her later this afternoon."

"How is she doing otherwise?"

"Stable, and as we discussed, very much the way she was before her first major incident. And I will tell you I'm convinced that any attempt to go through with her request would have led to the same exact result as her second major incident. She wants to be cured so badly that she's convinced herself she can do something which she can't."

"I'm not sure I understand," I replied. "If she's convinced herself that she can do it, why do you say she can't?"

"Have you ever been wrong about your own reaction to something?"

I nodded, "Sure."

"I'm completely convinced, as is the psychiatrist I'm working with, that's the case here. She wants something so badly that she's willing to take any risk to get it and has convinced herself that it'll turn out OK."

"What if it DID turn out OK?" I asked.

"What if you heard about someone who jumped from the upper deck of Riverfront Stadium onto the field and survived? Would you do it based on that one report?"

"Probably not."

"Why?"

"The risk is too great, and his survival was probably some kind of fluke."

"That's why you can't think the way you're thinking."

"But she seems normal."

"She IS normal; normal for her. She's back to functioning. She's going to school and working and living at home in a safe, controlled environment. She has friends she sees, and she's back to reading at an appropriate level. The only drug she's on right now is an anti-depressant. She can have a long, productive, fulfilling life, within limits."

"Which don't include her true desire -- a husband and kids."

"No, they don't. Mike, I want to cure her just as much as you want her to be cured, and she wants to be cured, but there is something miswired in Angie's brain. Whether that was caused by genetics, environment, or whatever, we don't know how to rewire it. And her solution is akin to a 'Hail Mary' pass with no time left on the clock. And besides, you're engaged."

I nodded, "I am, but you know how much I love Angie."

"And you'd give up Elizaveta for her?"

"If Angie weren't suffering from whatever condition she has, there never would have been an Elizaveta and probably no other girls after Jocelyn."

"I believe she pushed you away because she knew she couldn't handle it."

"I know," I sighed. "I was simply responding to your question."

"Is there anything else?"

"Not that I can think of. I'll see you in a month. Do you want me to call you after I see Angie?"

"Only if there's some grave concern or you think she won't share with me."

I nodded, got up, and went to the door. I opened it, and Elizaveta hopped up. She came to the door, we said 'goodbye' to Doctor Mercer, and then left the building. We got into my car, I started it and pulled out of the parking lot onto Route 28, heading East.

"What did you think?" I asked.

"She's nice," Elizaveta replied. "I think she was trying to make sure I knew what I was doing and that nobody pressured me."

"That's true, and if you think about it, it makes sense, given you're only fifteen."

"She asked me about sex education and birth control."

"No surprise there, either. You absolutely need to finish High School before we have babies!"

"I think she was trying to figure out if I knew how babies were made," Elizaveta said with a soft laugh that was almost a giggle. "I do, obviously!"

"Obviously, but sex is more than just that."

Elizaveta smirked, "Girls talk."

Given what I'd heard from some of my close female friends, that didn't surprise me in the least.

"Well, you keep those thoughts in your head until May 26th!"

"Yes, husband," she sighed.

I almost laughed out loud because, at that moment, she reminded me VERY much of Tasha at fifteen. A burning desire to have sex but knowing it wasn't possible. And in Tasha's case, a wait of at least three years. Elizaveta's desire would only have to be controlled for seven months. And if I could keep my relationship with Tasha on the correct side of the line for three years, I could certainly keep things with Elizaveta properly chaste for seven months.

I made a right turn and merged onto I-275 South, heading for Beechmont Avenue.

"Did you ever talk much with Angie?" I asked.

"Not really. I mean, I know who she is, and I said 'Hi' to her and stuff at church, but we never really talked because she was in college and I was in seventh grade. She knows we're engaged, right?"

"Yes. I told her, and that's when she asked if I'd bring you to see her. I suspect that's because she didn't really know you."

"Will she come to the wedding?"

"We'll invite her, but it'll be up to her mom and her doctors to decide."

"Mental illness is terrible, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"You really care for her, don't you?"

"I do."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes, but that doesn't really matter because her doctors don't believe she can ever have a relationship which would lead to marriage and children."

"That's really sad. For both of you, I guess."

"It is, but you and I are together, and nothing is going to change that."

"Sorry!" Elizaveta said quickly. "I didn't mean to doubt you or think you were going to go with her instead of me."

"I just wanted to make sure because I've never said that to you."

"I haven't said it to you, either. Mrs. Sokolova says it comes in time. I know for sure you'll love me!"

She smirked, making it into an innuendo.

"As much and as often as possible!" I replied.

"Do you think we could kiss more often?"

"If you want, yes."

"I do! I really like kissing you!"

"And I like kissing you, too, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)! The girls want to have a bridal shower for you besides the one the ladies at church will have. The guys at school will have a bachelor party for me, too." ("Kitten")

"And the men at church will try to get you drunk on vodka on Saturday night so they can laugh at you on Sunday!"

"Your dad and Father Nicholas know I drink very little, so the men are not going to get away with that! Not to mention, the bishop will be at our wedding."

"Will he perform the wedding?"

"He asked to be a guest," I replied. "But if we asked him, I'm sure he would say 'yes'. Would you like that?"

"I think your grandfather and my father would, but it's up to you."

"I'm sure he'd baptize our kids, too, if we ask."

"That would be cool. I think we should ask him to perform our Crowning."

"Then we will."

We arrived at Angie's house, and I introduced Elizaveta to Mrs. Stephens, who looked quite unhappy. Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do to change the situation, and I completely understood Doctor Mercer wanting to break Angie's obsession. I hoped that my marriage would do that, and that was a reason for her to actually come to the ceremony.

"Hi, Ang," I said when Elizaveta and I walked into the living room. "You remember Elizaveta?"

"I do," Angie replied. "How are you, Elizaveta?"

"Good! And you?"

"OK, I suppose. I'm glad you both came to see me. Mike, do you mind if I talk to Elizaveta alone?"

"No, I don't," I replied after a few seconds of thought. "I'll go talk to your mom."

I left the living room and went to the kitchen.

"Is there a problem?" Mrs. Stephens asked.

"No. Angie wanted to talk to Elizaveta privately. How are you doing?"

"It's not easy seeing you with your fiancée. I had hoped somehow things might work out, even though Doctor Mercer said it was extremely unlikely. I guess I'm concerned about what happens with Angie when her dad and I aren't around to care for her."

"Doctor Mercer is convinced Angie will be able to live on her own and have a good life, albeit without a husband and kids."

"I'd like to believe that, but I'm concerned."

"You know I'll do my best to help her, no matter what the circumstances."

"I keep asking myself what we did wrong," she sighed.

"Perhaps nothing," I replied gently. "Doctor Mercer has said we may never know why Angie is the way she is, and it may not be anything any of us did."

"Us? You feel responsible?"

"I triggered her incidents," I said. "That was my biggest concern with seeing her again. I wish I could do something more, but it doesn't appear I can."

"I feel like such a failure. Angie, her older brother..."

"Have you seen a counselor?"

"Briefly."

"It might not hurt to start again; it's helped me tremendously. Have you talked to your son at all?"

"I don't know how to find him. I tried years ago, but he disappeared completely."

"A friend of mine found someone she'd lost track of by using a company here in Cincinnati. I don't know what it costs, but maybe they could find him for you."

"I strongly suspect he doesn't want to be found. I'm not sure that it would make sense to try and find him if he doesn't want to be found."

"You could do what my friend did -- find him, then send him a letter. He can decide what to do at that point."

"Do you know the name of the company?"

"I'm almost positive it's Global Security."

"Let me check the White Pages."

Mrs. Stephens got up and, retrieved the White Pages from the top of the fridge, flipped to the correct page.

"Well," she continued, "there's a company by that name. I'll call on Monday."

"Mike?" Elizaveta said from the door to the kitchen, "You can come back."

"Is everything OK?" I asked quietly.

Elizaveta nodded, and I followed her back to the living room.

"Is it OK if I come to your wedding and ordination?" Angie asked.

I nodded, "I'd like to have you there. I'll make sure you're invited."

"Did you hear from any schools yet?"

"UC," I replied. "Clarissa and I both received our acceptance letters on Thursday."

"What about McKinley?"

"It could take until early next year to hear, though I suspect we'll hear sooner. The good thing is, I'm in medical school no matter what."

"When do you have to decide?"

"By the end of February. But if we get into McKinley, we'll accept right away. And I expect to get in, given our grades and test scores. How are you doing at school?"

"Fine. I'm going to start working on a degree next year, but I'm not quite sure what."

"And work is going OK?"

"Yes. And I can start driving again in January if I can pass the tests."

"That's great!" I exclaimed though I wondered if she actually could pass the written and driving tests.

"Would you kids like some refreshments?" Mrs. Stephens asked, coming into the living room with a tray.

She poured us each a glass of lemonade and then left. We helped ourselves to cookies from a plate on the tray and drank our lemonade.

"How is your exercise going?" I asked.

"Good. I plan to start taking some kind of martial arts class again once I can drive. I miss doing that."

And that would basically bring us full circle to how things were when she was in McKinley. I hoped the stability would last but feared something would trigger another incident. And I really feared it would be something I did or didn't do which caused it.

"I simply don't have the time," I said. "I'm still running every morning, but karate had to give way to everything else. I did learn to play golf, though."

Angie laughed softly, "A doctor playing golf? What's next? A police officer eating a doughnut?"

Both Elizaveta and I laughed, and I was happy to see a spark of the fun-loving Angie I'd known. Her only hang-up had been sex, and before the French kiss, she'd even been able to joke about that. I wondered what might have happened had I not done that. Would Angie have graduated and become a teacher? Would she have somehow been able to get past the block? Those were questions to which I'd never have answers and were part of why I'd said 'us' to her mom earlier.

We spent another twenty minutes talking before it was time to leave. Angie and I exchanged a chaste hug, we all said 'goodbye' and after I said 'goodbye' to Mrs. Stephens, Elizaveta and I left the house and got into my Mustang.

"Do you mind if I asked what you talked about?"

"Of course not! There are no secrets between you and me. She asked me if I loved you, and I explained how things were. It's obvious she's very much in love with you."

"Does that worry you?"

"No. You gave your word when we were betrothed. She did make me promise to care for you and to be understanding about your training and career."

"Something you gave me your word you would do when we were betrothed."

"It's going to be really difficult. And that's why Father and Doctor Mercer are focusing on making sure we have enough time together and that we talk. And why you made sure I knew what was going to happen."

"Yes."

"We can do it, Mike. I'm positive. If I wasn't positive, I would never have approached you. And if you didn't think I could handle it, you would never have asked me to marry you."

"Very true."

"Then we'll do the hard work. Together."

"Yes, we will," I agreed. "Together."

XXIX. The Waiting Is The Hardest Part

October 20, 1984, West Monroe, Ohio

"Please do not let my parents bait you into an emotional response," I said to Elizaveta as I turned off Route 50 in West Monroe.

"You think they will?"

"I have no idea; I just wanted to warn you."

"Paul seems really nice," Elizaveta said. "And yes, it was bad that he broke the law, but he and Liz are getting married. So, in the end, they're doing the right thing. You're five years older than I am, and right now, I'm only about a year older than Liz was."

"Which is why we're waiting until after we're married; well, part of the reason. The other part is not wanting to try to explain to Father Nicholas why we couldn't be chaste."

"Because it's fun and feels good?" Elizaveta smirked. "At least according to Marjorie!"

"She's the one you mean when you say 'girls talk'?"

"One of them. I know the boys at school talk about it, too!"

"I did," I chuckled. "All the time. And I hadn't even done it!"

"She's jealous because we'll be able to sleep in the same bed together every night. Her boyfriend has a pickup truck. They have a private place they park."

"That has to be cold during the Winter!" I chuckled.

"They just started doing it in May!" Elizaveta countered. "She said they use blankets, but if it's cold and snowy out? Brrr!"

"You seem to know a bit more than you let on," I grinned as I turned onto the road which led past my parents' house.

"We're a couple now, so I can be freer with what I say. And my mom and grandmothers aren't where they might hear!"

"So, the prim, proper, faithful Elizaveta talks about sex all the time with her friends?" I asked with a grin.

"Not ALL the time, silly! Girls are just as interested in sex as boys are. But people think we're not supposed to be, so we're careful. Boys will talk about it in the hallway at school or wherever."

"True, though I was more like you. Mostly, I only talked about it with my friend Dale. Jocelyn would get really upset with us if we talked about it when she was around. That was especially true if her boyfriend Carl was there."

"You were dating the girl from High School then, right? The one you were steady with, but who wouldn't go to church with you?"

"April? Yes."

"You dated for the entire school year?"

"Yes. She, Jocelyn, Carl, Dale, Stacey, and I had triple dates just about every week. The other couples broke up by the end of the Summer because Carl went into the Navy and Dale went to UW-Madison."

"And you dated your sister's friend, Emmy, right?"

"Until her dad found out that I had a black roommate, and then he forbade her from seeing me or hanging out with Liz, despite them being best friends."

"Would Emmy have gone to church with you?"

"It never got that serious. Basically, I needed a date for the Summer with our group, and she asked if I'd take her out."

"So, like me?"

"Not quite," I chuckled. "She specifically said she wasn't interested in getting married or having kids until after she graduated and went to college. You heard her say she's working on an Associate's in Criminal Justice so she can apply to the Sheriff's department. She's dating, but she still isn't thinking about marriage and kids for at least two more years, which would make her twenty-one or twenty-two. That's more common than what we're doing."

I pulled past my parents' house as usual, then backed into the driveway. I shut off the engine and put the car in first gear, then set the parking brake. Elizaveta and I got out, and she walked around the car, and then we walked up the front walk together. Because of the situation, I briefly contemplated ringing the bell but decided it was OK to just walk in. I opened the door and let Elizaveta in, then followed her and shut the door behind us.

"Hi, Mom," I said.

Mom got up from the living room couch and came over to us.

"Hi, Mike; hi, Elizaveta."

"Hello, Mrs. Loucks."

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

"His workshop."

"Does he plan to stay there?" I asked.

"I don't know. I've made some tea -- your grandfather's special blend. Come sit in the kitchen, and we'll talk."

We followed her to the kitchen and sat down, and she poured tea for the three of us.

"Did you kids get lunch?" she asked.

"We ate at Skyline Chili in Cincinnati after we left Angie's house."

"How is she doing?"

"Good, actually. She's almost back to what amounts to normal for her. But she's not cured if that's what you're asking."

"I was hoping."

"I've held out that hope since her first meltdown. Anyway, how was your talk with Liz? It's OK to talk in front of Elizaveta and say whatever you want. Consider her my wife, for all intents and purposes."

"Mike..." she said, her voice implying a warning.

"I'm not an idiot," I replied gently. "And I also have to answer to Father Nicholas and the bishop."

"We're not going to make love until we marry, Mrs. Loucks," Elizaveta said. "We agreed with each other, and we promised Father Nicholas."

"About Liz?" I prompted.

"She's stubborn."

"She comes by that naturally," I replied. "Russian culture, chrism, and a pair of X chromosomes, one of which is Dutch and one of which is Russian."

"What are you trying to say?"

"That you can be just as stubborn. So can I. So can Dad. It's the one trait everyone in this family shares, including both grandfathers. Mostly, it's good because it means we don't give up easily. In this case, it's a disaster because we won't budge from our positions."

"And you think your dad and I are the only ones who should budge?"

"I think the bottom line is that Liz and I both need to make our own way in the world, chart our own course, and be who we want to be. Just as I'm sure you did. Dad is a bit different because of the straitjacket his old church put on him. I understand the need for parents to control at least some aspects of their kids' lives when those kids are living at home, but once they move out, it's not up to the parents what happens."

"You don't think parents have an obligation to protect their kids?"

"Yes, but it's different once the kids are adults in their own right. And society says that's at eighteen. Elizaveta and I need permission from the government to marry. Paul and Liz don't. Well, they need a license, but that's granted automatically if they're both single and aren't first cousins. We need a judge to sign off, and that means Mr. and Mrs. Kozlov have to agree. That's not the case with Liz and Paul."

"But you think she's making a mistake, right?"

"I think she's taking a risk," I replied. "Only time will tell if it's a mistake. I advised against it, remember. She knows I don't approve, but she also knows I love her enough to set my disapproval aside in favor of her choice. In a sense, it's like my friends Robby and Lee. I can't sanction their relationship, but I have to set aside my disapproval in favor of their choice. Is it a sin? Absolutely. Do they know I believe that? They do. Do they know I love them? Absolutely."

"What are my options at that point? Refuse to associate with them? Then I lose all my other friends, too. What kind of witness is THAT? And, may I remind you, YOU taught me to be loving, kind, tolerant, and non-judgmental. And I'm going to remind you about something you said when we were discussing Katy a few years ago. You said that perhaps the most difficult thing for a parent to do is to NOT interfere in the lives of their adult children."

Mom was quiet for a moment.

"I guess I'm having trouble with my kids growing up and that I couldn't protect Liz from what happened."

"And I couldn't protect Jocelyn from her accident or Angie from her mental illness."

"It's different with your own kids."

I nodded, "I won't argue with that, and I saw how Mrs. Stephens is feeling. But, in the end, it's all about how we deal with the fact that we can't always protect everyone. And, to be honest, at this moment, Liz doesn't need protection; she needs love. Paul is doing his best to put his life back together after a serious lapse in judgment. He's working hard, following all the rules set by his parole officer, and from everything I can see, he loves Liz. She loves him, too, which actually puts them a step ahead of Elizaveta and me."

"You do understand the situations are very different, right?"

"Yes, Paul and Liz are both over eighteen and free to do as they choose."

"Mike, stop it! You know that's not the point."

"But it is," I countered. "That is completely the point. What happened in the past is in the past. It has to be. Paul isn't Orthodox, but if he repents and turns from his sins, God will forgive him just as he forgives us when we go to Confession and then receive the Eucharist. There is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ, but the Orthodox Church, unlike the Romans, does not claim to be the exclusive source and font of God's grace! Our bishops are icons of Christ, not his designated spokesmen. A bishop without his congregation is nothing. True repentance is the same, inside the church or outside it, and as such, Paul should have 'no further care' for his sins, and neither should you nor I."

"You sound like Father Herman."

"I should! You took me to church to be baptized, and my first memory of *anything*, is you holding me up to kiss the icon of the *Theotokos* when I was about two. From the time I can remember homilies, which I guess was when I was

about six, I've listened to Father Herman, and to the bishop. And now, to Father Nicholas. I really OUGHT to sound like them, and if I don't, then someone should tell the bishop he's making a grave error with his decision to ordain me.

"But you know what? I don't actually sound like Father Herman, or Father Nicholas, or Vladyka ARKADY. Do you know who I sound like? You; I sound like *you*. I'm not saying anything to you that you haven't said to me from the time I was little. You taught me to love God, to be faithful, and to live my faith. I'm doing that exactly the way you taught me. I know bad things have happened, and I brought them to your attention, though perhaps I could have done a better job. But we can't let those bad things control our lives. If we do, then Satan wins because we despair of God's power to cause all things to work together for good. It's through adversity that we find our true strength.

"Fundamentally, the Russian saying 'Life is suffering' fits quite well because we use our God-given freedom for our own selfish purposes, driven by our uncontrollable fear of our mortality. That is the root cause of sin of any kind. Christ died to conquer death, and by death, sin. It wasn't a battle with sin; it was a battle with mortality. If it was just about living a sinless life, then the Resurrection was completely unnecessary. If the battle was with mortality, then the Resurrection is the key to everything. Guess where Orthodox theology is focused? I seem to recall a big party in the Springtime celebrating something important."

"Mrs. Loucks," Elizaveta asked quietly, "what happens if, at some point in the future, Mike and I make a decision you don't like? Will you refuse to see your grandchildren because of that?"

"That's the same question my dad, Mike's grandfather, asked me," Mom replied.

"Does Dad know you saw Liz?" I asked.

"No."

"OK. I'm going to talk to him. You should stay here, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)."
("Kitten")

My mom rolled her eyes, which I was sure was about the use of the pet name. I got up and went down to the basement. I took a few deep breaths, letting them out slowly, and then went to my dad's workshop and sat down on the stool in the corner.

"Hi, Dad," I said.

"Mike," he replied flatly, not looking up from his lathe.

"Elizaveta is here with me. Would you at least come up and say 'hello' to your future daughter-in-law?"

He stopped what he was doing and turned to look at me, arms crossed and a sour look on his face.

"To give approval for you doing the same thing Paul did?"

"Is THAT what this is about? That's your REAL issue?"

"She's fifteen, for God's sake!" my dad protested.

"Yes, she is. She'll be sixteen in April, and, as she made clear to Mom a few minutes ago, we won't consummate our relationship until we're married. She's six years younger than I am, and when I'm thirty, and she's twenty-four, nobody would blink at the age difference. The same is actually true for Liz now -- she's eighteen, and Paul is twenty-eight. Nobody will blink. Was she too young to do

what she did at fourteen? Probably. Was Paul wrong? I think so, given the circumstances, which are fundamentally different from Elizaveta's and mine.

"As I said to Mom, past sins, once repented, are forgiven, and we're to have 'no further care' for them. And if we have repented, and God puts those sins from his memory, then who are we, as individuals, to hold that sin against someone? Yes, in certain circumstances, grave sin disqualifies us from ministry, but that's actually an acknowledgment of how the WORLD sees us, not how we as Christians are supposed to see ourselves."

"So you think it's OK for a serial fornicator who marries an underage girl to be a deacon?"

"I think that's up to Father Nicholas and Vladyka ARKADY to decide. I've confessed and repented of my sin."

"After enjoying it for a few years."

"I am making no excuses for sin, and I have no belief I'm anywhere near her level of holiness, but Mary of Egypt is a Saint of the Church, and I'm sure you know her story. So is Blessed Augustine of Hippo, despite his problematic theology and his desire to postpone chastity. I believe you know his story as well.

"My point is that repentance is the key. And Paul -- Reynolds, not the Holy Apostle -- has repented and turned away from his past sins just as his patron did. Paul Reynolds pled guilty, served his time, and is completing his parole. He's employed and working hard. He loves Liz, and she loves him. She made her mistakes as well, and she's repented of them. She has a job and is going to school."

"And you see absolutely nothing wrong with marrying an underage girl?"

"She won't be underage when we marry. The age of consent in Ohio is sixteen. And we'll need a judge's approval to marry, the same as Sasha Antonova needed to marry Yaroslav. Elizaveta's parents and grandparents approve, as does Father Nicholas, as does the bishop. And as I've said before, in a few years, the age difference will be completely irrelevant."

"Pedophilia is OK so long as it's sanctioned?"

"In psychology class, and in my reproductive physiology class, it was made clear that 'pedophilia' refers specifically to interest in pre-pubescents, NOT teenagers. Remember, Paul was convicted of statutory rape, which means the state agrees Liz willingly had sex, but that legally she couldn't consent. If she hadn't passed puberty, or if she hadn't willingly had sex with him, it would have been a regular rape charge, and he'd be doing twenty years to life. And, again, Elizaveta will be sixteen when we marry, which the state says is old enough to consent."

"You have an answer for everything, don't you?" he said with disgust.

"Not even close," I replied. "But I do have answers to questions which are important in my life. What are you going to do when Liz and Paul have kids? Refuse to see your grandchildren? Refuse to let Mom see them? Refuse to have a family Christmas celebration because you've decided Liz is beyond redemption? You know where I'll be on Christmas if that happens."

"Giving your full approval and support for her behavior."

"We're going to go around in circles, which makes no sense to me. All I can say is I love her, and I'm acting out of love. What you do at this point is up to you. I am grateful that you're coming to my wedding and ordination, and I hope, somehow, you can see your way clear to let Liz know you love her."

"I'm dealing with her the way I am because I love her!"

I suppressed a groan. One of the basic tenets of his brand of Protestantism was that God's righteous anger and judgment were displays of love, and that God hated sins and sinners so much, that only judgment was possible, though he relented, barely, for the 'elect'. That was the exact opposite of what the Orthodox Church taught, whereby judgment was the last resort and only came about if the sinner rejected God's love. In other words, we judged ourselves. There was no notion of 'sinners in the hands of an angry God' in Orthodox soteriology. Sinners were in their OWN angry hands when they rejected God's love.

"Dad," I said carefully, "that's not the Christian approach. I know that's what your old church taught, but it's wrong. God's love is so overwhelming, so infinite, that as the Scriptures say, He 'so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son for us'. God's justice is tempered by His love; justice doesn't override love. Christ came to call sinners to repentance, not for the self-righteous."

"That's how you see me? Self-righteous? You, the one who's preaching at me and acting 'holier than thou'?"

"I have never once said I'm not a sinner. You know I am. I know I am. So do the priests and the bishop, and most importantly, God knows. But that doesn't mean I shouldn't live my life according to my faith as best I can, even if I stumble and fall, which I do. I guess at this point, my only question is whether or not you'll come upstairs and talk with Elizaveta."

"No."

"Then I'm going back upstairs. I love you, Dad."

I got up from the stool, waited a few seconds for a response, and when he turned back to his workbench, I left the workshop and went back upstairs.

"You look unhappy, Mike," Mom said.

"No progress," I replied. "And he tried to make it worse, actually."

"His objection to you and Elizaveta?"

"Yes. He voiced it quite clearly and, in a way, intended to get a rise out of me. I didn't take the bait. Do YOU object?"

"That question doesn't have a simple answer."

"Sure it does," I replied. "Either you object, or you don't. Forget Dad's opinion for now."

"It's not black and white, no matter what you think," Mom said. "If you were steady with a plan to get engaged in a few years and married when Elizaveta was eighteen or nineteen, that would be different from the idea of marrying in May. You're basically rushing into something to which a lot of people will object simply because you want to meet the bishop's timeline."

"A lot of people object to Orthodoxy, or Christianity in general. I suppose I should just become an atheist immediately. Oh, wait, then a whole OTHER group of people will object!"

"That's different, and you know it!"

"How come every time I give some kind of counter-argument, you claim that it's 'different', but you can advance any counter-claim you like, and I have to accept it? You're treating me like I'm back in second or third grade! You didn't do this when I was in High School! Heck, you didn't do this after the incident in fourth grade, which got me in the papers. That's when you started listening to me in a

serious way, almost as an adult. Then Liz had her problems, and suddenly I'm eight years old in your mind again. And so is Liz. With regard to Elizaveta and me, I have four years of medical school, and by then, she'll be twenty, and nobody will care."

"Mrs. Loucks, don't you think I should be able to make my own decisions?" Elizaveta asked.

"Within limits, yes."

"And those don't include choosing my husband?"

"Yes, but not at age fifteen."

"But this is what I want! Why should I have to wait because you don't think I should decide now? My own parents are supportive. I discussed it with my mom and grandmothers before I spoke to Mike. And then I spoke to my dad and Father Nicholas. I want to be Mike's wife and the wife of a Deacon and Doctor. I had an opportunity, so I seized it."

"And you are so sure of yourself at fifteen you can make a lifetime commitment? Tasha was committed to marrying Mike when she was fifteen and changed her mind."

"She was unaware of what the true nature of the relationship would be. I spoke to Matushka Natalya, Matushka Anastasia, and Doctor Evgeni's wife, Maria, before I even spoke to Mike. And I spoke with my mom and grandmothers, as well as my godmother, as I just said. I believe you know the opinion of the older ladies at church."

Mom actually smiled, which I felt was a good thing.

"That it is better to marry than to burn?" Mom asked. "Taking the Apostle Paul's advice quite literally. But are you sure this is the right thing to do?"

"As I told one of my friends," Elizaveta said firmly, "it's important to find a person who is compatible and has the same goals, and who wants to live their life in the same way I do and has the same faith I do. I found Mike. And I told my friend that my grandma Yekaterina said it's much easier to love someone than to live with them! And I think Mike and I have compatible goals and desires.

"And yes, I'm sure of that, even though I'm 'only' fifteen. This is what I've always wanted, and it's why I chose to learn how to cook, bake, clean, do laundry, sew, and care for babies. Nobody made me learn those things; I wanted to learn them. And," she smirked, "as I told Mike, I don't have experience in making babies, but I think I'll be able to figure that out!"

Mom laughed hard, then said, "Pretty much everyone does, eventually."

"I hope you'll accept me as a daughter, Mrs. Loucks. And honor Mike's decision, as well as mine. In return, I promise lots of grandchildren!"

"Hang on a second!" I protested playfully. "We agreed on two or three!"

"As a minimum, yes," Elizaveta replied with a silly smile.

"I think you need to learn to be a better negotiator, Mike," Mom advised with a twinkle in her eye.

"I'm figuring out the lay of the land pretty quickly," I chuckled. "And it's tilted in the wife's direction! But that's OK because I agree with something Mr. Sokolov said -- that God gives us wives to make us better men."

"Did you just tell me I'm failing as a wife?" Mom asked.

I shook my head, "That is not how I meant it at all. I meant that Elizaveta would help me become a better man, a good Deacon, and a good Doctor. But I guess you think I was criticizing you."

"It felt that way, but I suppose that's my concern, not yours."

"Mom," I said, "whatever happened, and whatever happens in the future, all that matters is I love you and Dad. I also love Liz. I want us to be a family again. I want my kids to have four loving grandparents and eight loving great-grandparents. And I want to know we all love each other. That's it."

"You have been stubborn about that," Mom said with a wry smile.

"I'd say being stubborn about love is a virtue, Mrs. Loucks," Elizaveta said. "It makes me sure Mike will love me for the rest of our lives."

Mom nodded, "Of all the things you could say, that's probably the most true. Please, both of you, give me some time."

"We will," I replied. "And now we should head back to McKinley so we can be at Vespers. I want to check my mailbox as well."

"Getting antsy?"

"In a sense, yes, but with the UC acceptance in my pocket, it's a matter of improving the situation, if possible. The worst possible result is, well, impossible now."

"True. Elizaveta, thanks for coming by."

"You're welcome, Mrs. Loucks. I hope you'll let us come visit again soon."

"Anytime," Mom replied. "I mean that."

I smiled, and after exchanging a quick hug with my mom, Elizaveta and I left the house and got into my car. I started the engine, released the clutch, and pulled out of the driveway, heading for McKinley.

"Was that good or bad?" Elizaveta asked.

"I'd say it's progress with my mom," I replied. "My talk with my dad didn't go very well. I think it comes down to him still holding some of the very harsh, Calvinistic views he was taught growing up. I think, too, it's tied to things which happened before he met my mom."

"Do you think he'll eventually come to terms with it?"

"I honestly don't know. My mom isn't happy, and she's trying to walk a fine line with my dad so as not to wreck her marriage. In the end, though, I don't think it's possible."

"You think they'll divorce?"

"I think she has to confront him, eventually, and there's no way to tell what's going to happen. At this point, I have to leave it in her hands and in Father Herman's hands. May I say I was very happy with how you handled yourself?"

"Of all people, I would think you would have expected that! If you think I'm mature enough to marry you, I would hope I was mature enough to talk to your mom that way!"

"You're correct. I apologize."

"I think you should get used to saying those words, husband," she teased.

"I think you might be right!"



October 20, 1984, Rutherford, Ohio

I dropped Elizaveta at her house and then headed back to campus. When I arrived at the dorm, I went to my mailbox and found letters from Indiana and McKinley. I quickly opened them and found two acceptance letters. The Indiana one included a personal letter from Doctor Barton, offering scholarship money if I elected to come to Indiana and focus on emergency medicine.

I walked quickly to the elevators and went up to the 8th floor. Rather than go to my room, I headed for Clarissa and Jocelyn's room and knocked on the door. They didn't answer, so I went to Sandy's room, but she wasn't there either. I headed back to my room and picked up the phone to call Elizaveta. I let her know I'd been accepted to McKinley Medical School, which made her very happy. I said that I'd see her later in the afternoon, then called home to let my mom know.

I checked my watch and decided I had enough time for a short nap before I had to pick up Elizaveta for our pre-marital counseling. I'd been up early enough to run before picking up Elizaveta, and I didn't want to crash right after church. I closed and locked my door, stripped down to my briefs, set the alarm for forty-five minutes, got into bed, and quickly fell asleep. I awoke with the alarm, dressed for church, and went to find Lara. There was a note on her door which said she was with Tasha, so I checked for Clarissa and Jocelyn, but they still weren't around, so I left the dorm and headed to Elizaveta's house and, from there, to church.

Once we arrived at church, Elizaveta went to talk with Matushka Natalya while I met with Father Nicholas in his office.

"Normally, this is where I'd make sure your sex education and family planning information were sufficient, but I don't feel I need to do that with you. How much have you revealed about your past to Elizaveta?"

"Just that I was 'experienced', as I put it. She assumes she knows who, and I think it's best to leave it at that. I had a long talk with Doctor Mercer about it this morning."

"And her advice, if I may ask?"

"You may. She was concerned that if Elizaveta thought I'd only been with one girl, and she discovered I'd been with others, it would cause a serious problem. I don't disagree with that, but I also don't feel anyone is going to spill the beans, so to speak. I guess from my perspective, her knowing I'm not a virgin was the key point, not my sexual history, as it were."

"How did she respond?"

"Surprised, but not upset. We've talked about other relationships I've had, specifically the ones with April during my Senior year and Tasha, of course, but it was more about why the relationships ended than anything else. She knows a number of the girls I dated, including Katy Malenkova and Lara Federova. Again, she hasn't made any complaints, except to take me to task for also dating girls like Kimiko and Maggie, who weren't Orthodox. And today, we saw Angie together."

"Not to stray from the purpose of this talk, but how did Angie react?"

"She's OK. She cried when I initially told her about Elizaveta, but otherwise, I think she was well-prepared for this by Doctor Mercer. I'm actually more concerned about Angie's mom right now, and what I see there is a pretty good indication to me that I'm nowhere near strong enough to even attempt anything like we discussed."

"It's somewhat different with your own children, obviously, and as much as it pains me for Angela's sake, I have to agree with Father Stephen and Doctor Mercer on that topic."

"Me, too," I sighed. "We also saw my parents today. Mom was hospitable but still upset. My dad is simply beside himself. I tried to speak with him, but basically, I got a strong dose of judgmental Calvinist thought."

Father Nicholas nodded, "We got that when he was here, too. We don't disagree that God's judgment is harsh and that Hell is the painful and sad destiny of those who reject God's love, but we can't abide by the idea that God's love is overwhelmed by demands for judgment."

"He tried to draw an equivalence between my relationship with Elizaveta and the one between Liz and Paul nearly four years ago."

"I can see that, and that's something you're going to have to deal with, though mostly it will be people outside the church."

"As I said to my dad, when I graduate from medical school, she'll be twenty, and nobody will blink. So maybe we'll get some grief in the short term but not in the long term. Speaking of medical school, I received my acceptance to McKinley today, along with acceptance to Indiana with an offer of scholarship money."

"Have you changed your mind?"

I shook my head, "No. The only way that will come into play is if Clarissa and Sandy don't get into McKinley. If they don't, then we'll need to sit down and come up with a plan. And that would include Elizaveta, obviously. But I can't imagine we won't all get in. I tried to find Clarissa and Sandy before I came to church, but they were out."

"Well, you know my preference, I'm sure, but do what you need to do in this case, Mike. Shall we go back to the main topic?"

"Sure."

"I know you and Elizaveta have discussed a family and the timing. I take it you're still in agreement on that?"

"Other than the number, yes," I replied with a grin. "She felt we were negotiating a lower bound, not a limit!"

Father Nicholas laughed, "I think if you're in agreement on the lower bound, everything else will work out. Have you discussed how you'll handle the timing?"

"Birth control pills," I replied. "She'll ask at her gynecological appointment that she'll have just before her sixteenth birthday, which is enough time for them to be effective before our wedding."

"I assumed you'd be aware."

"Funny thing," I grinned, "I only learned about it taking a month for them to be effective in the reproductive physiology class I'm taking this semester. I had no idea before that how they worked or how they were used. I also had exactly zero clue about menstrual cycles beyond that they occurred roughly every month. I

now have what I'd consider a guy's overview of something he can NEVER truly understand!"

Father Nicholas laughed, "Join the club. Obviously, that was one topic I would cover, again, from a male perspective. I take it they discussed the effects of hormones on behavior?"

"PMS?" I grinned. "I'll duck and cover as necessary. It's funny, though, I never noticed Liz being more of a, uhm, pain in the rear, one week a month! A bit moody, but that's it."

"All kidding aside, I'm sure you're aware it affects different people in different ways."

"Yes, and that taking the Pill actually helps regulate a woman's cycle and can, in some cases, dampen the effects of the hormone surges. There are a couple of female friends at Taft who take them either for regulation of their periods or to reduce cramping. Our prof in reproductive physiology did also point out that was an effective way to ask for birth control when you didn't want to say you were asking for birth control. Some of the girls take something called Midol as well."

"It seems your class is helping you piece together what you've learned by simply living in close proximity to young women."

"When all that stuff with Liz happened three years ago, I was pretty clueless about that kind of thing. I think Doctor Mercer kind of got a kick out of just how naïve I was."

"Do you foresee any concerns?"

"Not really," I replied. "Doctor Mercer's comment was that Elizaveta is typically curious about sex, which she says is normal for a fifteen-year-old girl."

"The thing which gives nightmares to fathers everywhere!" Father Nicholas declared.

"And the reason the «бабушки» (*babushki*) want to pair teens off and get them married as quickly as possible. Society obviously disagrees."

"There are two very divergent schools of thought, and the school which believes in arranged marriage is in serious retreat. There are arguments both ways, but given the divorce rate is approaching 30%, one has to question conventional thinking on marriage. I've heard higher numbers, but they don't seem statistically valid to me."

"You mean simply counting marriages and divorces in a specific year and doing the math? Our stats professor used that as an example of how not to do statistics. The more accurate number is how many divorces per thousand, usually using women, And that yielded a number between 15% and 25%, based on rough numbers we pulled together for the 70s. Your comment about 30% isn't far off, but the 50% number is probably way off."

"You've always felt that your best approach was to find someone who could handle life with you without concern for being in love."

"That's true," I agreed.

"And Elizaveta's seems similar -- she, like Tasha, was more concerned with having a faithful Orthodox husband with whom she can raise a faithful Orthodox family. For them, it was better to find someone compatible instead of someone they fell in love with. Obviously, if they could have both, they would,

but being in love took a back seat to their desire for a very specific set of goals. All of that said, there is one important topic we do need to discuss."

"Fidelity? You're concerned that my past behavior might lead to an indiscretion?"

"Given the severe pressure and stress medical students and Residents are under, it's certainly a valid concern, especially given your close friendships with young women. I don't see you as the type to drink to excess or ever use drugs, but given your past, I'm concerned that some minor issue at home might lead you to stray."

"What do you propose?"

"Strong male friends and strict adherence to the clergy guidelines, which state clearly you shouldn't be alone with any woman except your wife. That's not to say you can't have coffee, or whatever, in a public place, but it is to say never in private. You should adhere to those rules starting now, for your own sake, for the sake of your marriage, and for the sake of the parish. And that means being accountable for your behavior."

"Regular confession, obviously."

"Yes, but more than that. A legitimate examination of how you behaved between confessions -- did you do anything that might lead you astray or cause you a potential for sin."

"You know Clarissa is my closest confidante."

"And I'm not telling you to stop talking with her; just make sure it's in a place where you aren't alone. Temptation strikes from the oddest directions, and her sexuality is no guarantee of safety."

Which I knew for a fact, given our experiments and, that I'd asked her to marry me, knowing she'd have to say 'no'.

"Got it."

"I don't think there's anything else at the moment. I do have a message from His Grace -- he'd like you and Elizaveta to come see him before Thanksgiving. He'll be at the Cathedral the next two Sundays."

"Then a week from tomorrow unless Elizaveta has something going on of which I'm not aware."

"Let me know, and I'll get the message to His Grace."

A few minutes later, Elizaveta came in, and we decided to take a walk before Vespers.

"Everything OK?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "She was just making sure I wasn't completely clueless about my body, sex, and babies."

"You're not?" I asked with a smirk.

"In seven months, I will show you!" she declared fiercely.

I grinned and sang, "*The waiting is the hardest part; Every day you see one more card; You take it on faith, you take it to the heart; The waiting is the hardest part.*"

Elizaveta winked at me, kissed my cheek, and we continued our walk.

XXX. Tradition

October 20, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

After Vespers on Saturday night, I headed back to campus and found a note saying the gang had gone to see *Thief of Hearts* and would be back around 10:00pm. I was dying to know if Clarissa and Sandy had received their letters from McKinley, but it looked as if I'd have to wait a few hours to find out.

Given that my close friends were out, I really didn't have much to do, so I picked up my guitar and played, though I didn't sing. I started messing around with variations on songs, similar to how José and I riffed on his Spanish songs. I'd been playing for about ten minutes when one of the Freshmen, Tracy Vaughn, who was majoring in history, came to the door.

"I heard you playing," she said. "OK to listen?"

"Sure."

She came into the room and sat on the other couch.

"Where are your friends?"

"At a movie," I replied. "I was at church. They'll be back in about ninety minutes, I guess."

"Are you guys doing a concert next month?"

"Yes, but just here in the dorm, not anything formal. It'll be on November 16th. We usually do a couple of concerts, but I've been really busy this semester because of medical school interviews."

"I heard you got engaged, so what's with the wedding band?"

"Traditionally, both the guy and girl wear engagement rings in the Orthodox Church, and they're just simple bands like the one I'm wearing."

"No diamond?"

"No diamond."

"Why would you get engaged even before you graduate?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Tying yourself down when college is supposed to be fun!"

"It has been fun, for the most part," I replied. "And I don't feel 'tied down'. I mean, you're what? Eighteen or nineteen?"

"I'll actually be eighteen in January. I graduated a year early."

"I can see not wanting to be tied down as a Freshman, but in about seven months, Seniors who aren't going on to a graduate school of some kind are going to get jobs, get married, and probably start families. How old were your parents when they married?"

"Twenty-two, but they're not exactly normal!"

"That's about the age my parents and my friend Jocelyn's parents got married."

"No, I meant they don't have a normal marriage," she corrected. "They think it's dumb to tie yourself to one person for life."

"Uhm, then why get married?"

"Because they want to live together, but they want to fool around with other people."

"Interesting," I replied evenly.

"You don't think it would be boring only being with one person for the rest of your life?"

"The idea that sex could be boring has never even entered my mind!" I countered with a grin.

"I broke up with my boyfriend earlier in the week because the sex WAS boring!"

"If you want to fool around with just anyone, why have a boyfriend?" I challenged.

"For regular good sex, then other guys provide variety."

"Nothing personal, but I wouldn't be happy with my steady girlfriend fooling around with other guys. And I've never met a girl who thought it would be OK for me to fool around if we were a couple! Well, before you, I guess."

"My sister dated a guy who always has two or three girlfriends: one main girlfriend and then two or three others. He's also allowed to play around, and he was awesome in bed!"

The drift of the conversation finally dawned on me. I realized I was still a bit clueless, or maybe a lot clueless, but eventually, I figured things out, though sometimes it required Clarissa or Jocelyn to point me in the right direction. In this case, I was a 'target of opportunity' because the gang wasn't around.

"Well," I said. "that's not me, and it'll never be me. This," I held up my left hand, "is an absolute promise to never violate my wife's trust. And given what betrothal means in the Orthodox Church, I'm fully committed to her, permanently, with zero wiggle room. There are plenty of other guys on this floor and other floors who might be interested."

Tracy shrugged, got up, and left the room. I shook my head and went back to playing my guitar. She was cute, and I suspected she'd be fun, but even without Elizaveta, I wouldn't have been interested. My entire approach had changed over the Summer, and even if, God forbid, something prevented me from marrying Elizaveta, I wasn't going back to my old ways.

About an hour later, Clarissa, Jocelyn, Sandy, Lara, Robby, Lee, Sophia, José, and Sarah came into the room.

"How was the movie?" I asked.

"Pretty good," Clarissa replied.

"Did you guys get any acceptance letters today?"

"Indiana for me," Clarissa replied. "And Cincinnati for Sandy."

"McKinley and Indiana for me," I replied. "Looks like it's falling into place. We're all assured of UC, so now it's just a matter of you two getting your McKinley acceptance letters."

"Did your letter from Indiana have scholarship money?"

I nodded, "Yes, and a personal letter from Doctor Barton. It's certainly tempting, but for my own reasons, McKinley is my preferred option."

"And that makes it my preference as well," Clarissa replied. "And if you looked over the materials from McKinley, there are grants available, and we have those lists we received from Doctor Norris as well. I think Indiana is just trying to get ahead of the curve."

"Why are the acceptance letters staggered?" Sophia asked. "You three all interviewed at the same time!"

"No idea," Clarissa answered. "All the schools had our scores, transcripts, and letters of recommendation when we went in. But we were warned it could take until February. No offense meant to Sandy, but with the MCAT scores, Mike and I had, we'd be at the top of their lists unless we failed the interviews miserably. Sandy got into UC; it just took a bit longer for her to get her letter."

"As Mike said, we're all in," Sandy said. "And that is the key. I'm sure I'll get into McKinley, given I got into UC."

"What did you do tonight, Mike?" Jocelyn asked.

"I went to church, of course, then came back here, found your note, played my guitar, fended off a seduction attempt, and now I'm talking to you."

"Tracy?" Sarah asked with a smirk.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"She's working her way through the floor. You're mostly never alone, so she never had the chance."

"Now I'm doubly glad I declined!" I grinned.

"As if there was a real risk of you doing that!" Lara said with a smirk.

"No, but I am glad I declined nonetheless!"

"Could you and José play a bit?" Sarah asked.

"I'm game if he is," I replied.

"Let me get my guitar," José said with a smile.



October 23, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"I'm glad to hear your parents will attend your wedding and ordination," Viktor Kozlov declared after we placed our orders.

"Me, too. Things aren't resolved by any means, but I did make some good progress with my mom."

"Elizaveta wouldn't say what the exact issue is, but she did say the problem is with your father and sister."

"Which is about all I can say," I replied.

"I did some checking on my own, and I suspect it has to do with you helping her fiancé get a job and his criminal record."

I nodded, "You spoke to Mr. Zhuravlyov. He was aware of the issue."

Mr. Kozlov grinned, "Let's just say that Yuri Valentinovich is only kept in line by his wife!"

I smiled and nodded, "I got that idea. He flirted, at least as much as he could, with my friend Clarissa. And made the comment he should be so lucky as to have young girls interested in him."

"That old goat would have a heart attack if he had such an opportunity."

I shook my head, "He wouldn't because dead men can't have heart attacks!"

Mr. Kozlov laughed, "Our wives do keep us in line! Anyway, I'm assuming your dad objects to that relationship?"

"Yes. And he's not particularly thrilled with my betrothal to Elizaveta and our plan to marry in May."

"Because of her age?"

"Yes."

"When I look at the things which are happening in society, and see what the young men and women are up to, as a father, I think it's much better for Elizaveta to marry than suffer all the temptations which arise. I would never tell her I felt that way, as I wouldn't want to pressure her, but as I said, she came to me and told me what she wanted. Fortunately, you were amenable and thus saved your first life!"

"Second," I replied with a grin. "The first was in fourth grade when I helped a female classmate who was bleeding profusely from a very bad cut. That's when I decided I wanted to specialize in trauma."

"That's right, Elizaveta mentioned that. She said you were in the newspaper?"

"Yes. My mom has a clipping in a scrapbook, along with the ticket stub from the Reds game the girl's family took me to as part of their 'thank you'."

"Commendable! Back to the present -- how are things going?"

"Just fine, I think. School is challenging, as usual, but not overwhelming. The real challenge is our Senior project, but that's on track, and Doctor Stanton, who's my advisor, is pleased with our progress. As for church, Elizaveta and I are going to Columbus on Sunday to see Vladyka ARKADY. And we've talked about my family. Other than that, we're leaving the wedding plans in the hands of your mother and mother-in-law. I know enough to keep my nose out of that!"

"Life is much calmer and much happier when you let the women do the things which they believe are rightly theirs to do!"

"My female friends are probably going to throw a bridal shower for Elizaveta sometime in early May, and my male friends are going to throw a bachelor party for me on Friday night after our last exam. I'm assuming your father is arranging the party for Saturday night?"

"As is traditional, though I think we'll take it easy on the vodka in deference to your self-imposed limits."

"Thank you. I don't mind having a celebratory drink, and I'll probably do that through my career, but I have to be exceedingly careful."

"I completely understand. I know the rules from sitting on the Hospital Board. A friend of mine who is a retired Navy pilot has similar rules for when he's going to fly. He flies for TWA now. And on that note, is there anyone who's not Orthodox we should invite?"

"Some friends from school -- José, Robby, Lee, and Jocelyn's boyfriend, Bill. I wish my friend Dale could be here, but he's going to have a tough time making it here for the wedding, let alone the party the night before. He has to fly in from Madison on Saturday, then fly back on Sunday evening. And I'd like you to invite Paul Reynolds, please."

He made notes in a small notebook he pulled from the pocket of his sports coat.

"If we invite Paul, will your dad come?" he asked.

"Isn't that really up to my dad?" I asked. "I'd feel wrong not to invite my sister's husband."

"Well, we have several months for that to work itself out. Did your friends receive their acceptance letters?"

"We're all accepted to UC, and Clarissa and I are accepted at Indiana. Right now, everything looks good. We're confident Sandy will get into McKinley."

"Is there anything at all that you need assistance with?"

"Not at the moment. Basically, I need to finish my degree and prepare for the wedding."

The waiter brought our food, and after I gave the blessing, we began eating. The food was good, as always, and when we finished eating, I headed back to campus for study group.



October 25, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"That's it, then!" I declared. "We send back the signed acceptance letters."

Sandy and Clarissa had received their acceptance to McKinley, which meant the three of us could attend medical school there together.

"Agreed," Clarissa said.

"All for one and one for all!" Sandy added.

"Athos, Porthos, and Aramis," I replied with a grin. "Does that make Fran d'Artagnan?"

"Could be!" Clarissa replied. "It sure makes things work better for her and Jason. The only question is Pete."

"He'll be fine," Sandy said. "He already talked to Doctor Norris, and he should have no trouble getting into Taft. He might even do a PhD with Jason."

"Cool!" I exclaimed. "We'll have our core study group together right from the start."

We all signed our acceptance letters then walked to the Post Office to mail them back. Personally, I would have driven to the medical school to deliver them, but the US Mail was explicitly stated in the letter as the only permitted way to return them. We headed back to the dorm, where we found Jocelyn waiting for us. We told her where we'd been, and she asked to speak to me in private, so we went into my room, and Clarissa and Sandy stayed in the lounge.

"What's up?" I asked.

"What do you think of Bill?"

"I think he's a nice guy. Why are you asking?"

"Why do you think?"

"You do not need MY permission for that!" I protested.

"I'm not asking permission! I'm asking your opinion as the guy who knows me best; the guy I grew up with; the guy who's my closest friend."

"I think if you're asking me, you aren't ready because if you were sure, you wouldn't be asking me."

"How did you decide?"

"You do NOT want to go there," I chuckled. "My decision-making process in that regard, with one very specific exception, was fatally flawed. And YOU were the exception."

"Wait! You regret every other encounter?"

I shook my head, "No, that's not what I'm saying at all. I'm saying my decision-making process was seriously flawed."

"Do you regret any of them?"

"A few, including the threesome. Also the fact that the number kind of got out of control because I let my desire overwhelm my discretion. I guess my advice for

you is that you have to figure out why you're unsure. May I ask a very personal question?"

Jocelyn smirked, "Asks the man who has cum in my mouth!"

"We're at a different place in our relationship," I replied. "And soon enough, conversations like this will have to be done very carefully."

"For the reasons we talked about in the past? The risks of a stress-induced failure?"

I chuckled, "An interesting way to put it. My question is about how far you've gone, and you obviously don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"I'd call it light petting," she replied.

"Over the clothes only, right?"

"Yes."

A stray thought crossed my mind, and I decided to voice it.

"Jos, are you concerned about your scars?" I asked gently.

"A little, but I don't think that's the reason."

"You do realize you're beautiful and have a VERY sexy body, right?"

"You're biased!"

"My bias is based on repeated, thorough, and detailed investigation with multiple data points!"

"Thank you."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I guess it's that same conversation you and I had about how many is too many."

"Jos, this would be your second unless you've kept something from me."

"No way, Mik! I made THAT mistake once, and I'll never make it again!"

"Then I'm going to tell you the same thing you told me -- let your hair down, have some fun, and don't worry too much about it. You are attracted to him, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"And you liked him touching you?"

"Obviously."

I shrugged, "Then just have fun, Jos. It's not like you're hopping from bed to bed. In fact, I'd never expect you to do that. If I have any regrets, it's how far I let it get out of control. I don't see you doing that."

"Don't take this question the wrong way, but how did someone with such a low sex drive end up with so many partners and 'bed hop'?"

"Because it was about comfort, stress relief, and intimacy more than actual sex. And it varied between what I was using it for. Well, then there was Tasha."

Jocelyn laughed, "Pure, unbridled, uncontrollable lust!"

"Pretty much! I'm guessing your real reason for asking, when it comes right down to it, is you don't think Bill is 'Mr. Right', however, you want to define that."

"I guess it's more that I don't know if he is or not. I'm not saying he's not, but I'm not ready to say he is."

"But you're exclusive now, right? Neither of you are seeing anyone else? And don't intend to?"

"Correct."

"Then, honestly, I don't see a problem. Is this purely speculative?"

"The destination is pretty obvious at this point, and if I'm going to say 'no' or 'not yet', it needs to be now, not after things progress. It wouldn't be fair to lead him on."

"True. I think you should do what feels right to you."

Jocelyn smirked, "That ring on your left hand says I can't!"

"Thank you."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Asks the woman who has had my tongue in her pussy!"

Jocelyn laughed, "Touché. Has Mindy bothered you at all? You were a bit worried about that."

"Word on the street has her enjoying the company of a couple of different young men in her dorm. Other than one half-hearted attempt during orientation, she's barely spoken to me. I do think it was a good thing we got her moved to the other dorm."

"I have to agree. Want to quadruple date tomorrow with Clarissa, Sandy, and me and our guys and girl? Bill and Pete want to see *Terminator*, and we girls acquiesced."

"I can't take Elizaveta to an R-rated movie," I replied. "I know it's for violence, but even so, I'm not her parent or guardian."

"Hmm. Our other option was *Body Double*, but that's 'R' as well. I guess you could take her once you married?"

"That's an interesting question. Effectively, she's emancipated by the marriage, but the rules don't take that into account. It's a question I'd have to ask, but that's next Summer, and in less than a year after we marry, it won't be an issue."

"How about having dinner with us?"

"That will work. Did I help you with your decision?"

"You did. Shall we invite the girls back in?"

"Yes."



October 28, 1984, Columbus, Ohio

On Sunday morning, I picked up Elizaveta from her house at 6:30am so we could drive to Columbus in time for Matins. We'd met the previous evening with Father Nicholas to work out our joint prayer and fasting rules, though we wouldn't really be able to pray together on a regular basis until we married. The prayer rule conformed fairly closely to the one I'd been following -- morning and evening prayers with the addition of the Psalter and the lives of the saints commemorated that day. Our fasting rule was somewhat relaxed because of our circumstances as students -- and we'd refrain from meat on fasting days, but dairy and eggs were permitted. I'd pushed back a bit, but Father Nicholas had been firm in not wanting us to be overly strict.

At the bishop's request, I served in the altar with Subdeacon Alexi and Protodeacon Seraphim. As was the norm for a subdeacon, I assisted the bishop with vesting and carried the *dikirion*, a double candleholder, while Subdeacon Alexi carried the *trikirion*, a triple candleholder. I also assisted the bishop in washing his hands and held his staff at the appropriate time. When the Divine Liturgy ended, Elizaveta and I joined the rest of the congregation for lunch, then went to the bishop's office for our meeting.

"I understand from Father Nicholas you and your friends were accepted to McKinley Medical School and decided to attend there."

I smiled, "News travels fast! I only told him before Vespers last night!"

"I want to keep abreast of important things which occur in the lives of my clergy," he replied. "Father Nicholas called last night. He also let me know that whatever the issue was with your parents had been resolved by Father Herman and that you had behaved in a proper Christian manner. And your grandfather made it clear you were not at fault."

I wondered who had called the bishop and told him my parents had boycotted the betrothal ceremony, but in the end, it didn't matter. It was something he needed to know, even if he didn't know all the details.

I nodded, "They'll be at the crowning and my ordination."

"Good. And I understand you've developed a good relationship with Elizaveta's father."

"Yes, with her grandfathers as well, though I don't spend nearly as much time with them as I do her father."

"Father Nicholas tells me you chose Alexey and Miloslava Sokolov as your sponsors."

I nodded, "It seemed like the right thing to do, as they're Elizaveta's godparents, and I work for Mr. Sokolov during the Summer and sometimes on breaks."

"And you're spending time with Nikolas Antipov and Tasha Antonova?"

"Yes."

"All of this is good. You're both going to confession regularly and attending services regularly, and you now have shared prayer and fasting rules."

"All of that is correct."

"Good. And you have no qualms or second thoughts about your marriage or ordination?"

"I have second thoughts about my ordination all the time, but I suspect Father Nicholas spoke to you about that."

"If sinlessness were required for ordination, I would still be Timofei and probably teaching history after retiring from an unremarkable career in the minor leagues!"

"You played baseball?"

"Once upon a time," he replied with a smile, "I was a first baseman and batted third in the order."

"When did you decide to go to seminary?" I asked.

"After one year at Ohio University, I decided that playing baseball and studying history was not my calling. I went to Saint Tikhon's in 1945. When I graduated, there were no degrees conferred, so I lack an M. Div., or anything similar. My first assignment as a priest was as an associate pastor at Holy Trinity in Parma. After that, I became pastor of Saint George in Rossford. I was there until 1971, when I was enthroned."

"My grandfather mentioned being your friend but never mentioned you played baseball."

"It was a long time ago," he said wistfully. "So, other than your concern about sin, no second thoughts?"

"No, Vladyka," I replied. "I am yours to command."

He laughed, "I believe the young lady to your left holds the master trump in that regard!"

"As it should be!" Elizaveta said with a soft laugh.

The bishop and I both joined her, laughing together.

"And you, Elizaveta," Bishop ARKADY asked, "are comfortable with me ordaining Michael to the diaconate after your marriage?"

"Yes, of course! I was aware of your desire to ordain him when I first spoke to him."

"And you accept the role of Matushka and all that comes with it? This is a shared ministry, even if I only lay hands on Michael."

"I do," Elizaveta said. "I've spoken to both Matushka Natalya and Matushka Anastasia at Saint Michael the Archangel. I understand what is necessary."

"And you have no objections and know of no impediments to either of you?"

"None, Vladyka," she replied firmly. "I'm curious, has any wife said 'no'?"

"It hasn't happened to me, but it did happen recently with a brother bishop. And, to be honest, if a wife does not feel her husband is qualified or does not feel she can truly share his ministry, then the man in question probably shouldn't be ordained. And we err on the side of caution in that regard."

"Vladyka, would you be willing to perform our crowning ceremony?" she asked.

"Yes, of course! It would be my honor if you and Michael would like that."

"We would."

"Then I will speak with Father Nicholas. Subdeacon, did you speak to anyone about being your sponsor for your ordination?"

"Father Deacon Vasily and Father Deacon Seraphim both agreed to act as my sponsors."

"Good. Then, I believe all that remains is the passage of time! I'll see you both during my next visit to Saint Michael, which will be in December."

"Thank you, Vladyka," I said.

"Thank you, Vladyka," Elizaveta added.

We both received his blessing, then headed out to my car. I took off my cassock, helped Elizaveta into the passenger seat, then got into the driver's seat and set out for McKinley.

"There really isn't anything left to do, is there?" Elizaveta asked.

"Just a few more pre-marital counseling sessions with Doctor Mercer and a few more with Father Nicholas. Well, and then whatever preparations your grandmothers are making."

"It's easier to leave it to them," Elizaveta replied. "It'll be very traditional, though I think they'll have an American-style wedding cake. They did ask me what kind of music you preferred."

"You haven't seen my collection of albums," I replied. "I have pretty much everything from heavy metal to classical. Did you have a specific song in mind for our first dance?"

"I was thinking of either *Endless Love* or *Up Where We Belong*. What do you think?"

"I think the lyrics for *Up Where We Belong* are perfect for us," I replied.

"OK. Do you have that album?"

"No, because it was only released as a single, and I don't usually buy 45s. It was on the soundtrack for the movie, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, but I didn't buy that one because I had some other album I wanted more at the time."

"OK. I'll tell my grandmothers, and they can get it, I'm sure."

"Actually, if it's going to be our song, I'll buy the single. I already have *Endless Love*, one of the very few 45s I own, which I bought because of singing it with Milena."

"Anything else you like or dislike?"

"If you avoid ABBA, I'll be fine with anything!"

"You don't like them?"

"I never saw what the fuss was about, and Liz played a couple of their albums almost non-stop. Part of it was to annoy me, which it did, but mostly, it was because she liked them. Once I moved out of the house, I actually bought her a copy of *The Visitors*."

"I wish I could see your collection."

"The dorm rules prohibit you even coming upstairs. My first semester, that wasn't the case, but there were problems with underage girls in the dorm, so they tightened those rules."

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

"I hadn't made any plans because I wasn't sure what was going on at home."

"Would you come to our house? And for Nativity, too?"

"I need to talk to my mom and Father Nicholas before I commit, but if I don't go home, I'll certainly come to your house. I guess we should talk about what to do after we're married."

"You mean with your parents or my parents?"

"Yes. And it'll be even more complicated when we have kids of our own. And by my work schedules."

"Maybe we should plan to have Thanksgiving and Nativity just for us and, eventually, our kids? And then schedule something between Nativity and Theophany with our parents and grandparents?"

"That's probably a good idea," I agreed. "Especially given that Residents get stuck with the worst shifts. Supposedly, there is a bit of accommodation and trading I'll be able to do so I can serve at church, but I don't really need to worry about that for four years. Also, given we're talking about this stuff, I should tell you I'll stay at Doctor Blahnik's house during Thanksgiving break and Winter break."

"Instead of going home?"

"Yes. And actually, my home address is Doctor Blahnik's house. That's where my car is registered and what's on my driving license."

"Why?"

"I changed it to a McKinley address when I was a Freshman, and it's just easier to have it at her house. Remember, I was going to live there during medical school."

"And I messed up your plans?" she teased.

"That's not quite how I would have put it!" I replied with a grin.

"Good!"

"Is there something special you want to do together?"

"Yes! But we can't until after the crowning!"

"I mean that we can do before then, silly girl!"

"I wish we could spend more time together, but I know why we can't."

"We'll have our breaks, and most of that time we can spend together."

"I'd like that."

"Then that's what we'll do."



November 3, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Do you know which option he chose?" I asked Melody when I walked into the auditorium on Saturday afternoon.

"He's in a suit and tie," she replied.

"Cool. Then I'll keep my cassock on. It'll play perfectly into the point of them being liturgical even though they claim not to be."

"That's just too funny," she replied. "You're going to hang him with his own rope."

"Indubitably," I grinned.

"I take it you watched *The Flintstones*?" she asked.

"Yep!"

"Mike," Elizaveta said, "I'm going to go sit by Father Nicholas."

"OK," I replied. "I'll see you when it's over."

"Mop the floor with him!" she said fiercely.

"Yes, Dear," I deadpanned.

She laughed and moved away, and then Melody and I walked up to the stage, where two podiums were set up. Students were flowing into the auditorium, and it was about half-full with fifteen minutes left before the scheduled start time for the debate.

"You didn't bring a Bible?" Melody asked.

"Why?"

"He has his with him."

"I'm sure. It's the only thing he has to rely on. I have nearly 2000 years of tradition, including seven Ecumenical Councils, liturgy, prayers, hymns, hagiographies, and books such as *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*."

"Don't you use texts when you teach Sunday School?"

"Just outline notes," I replied.

"Did you bring anything with you?"

"I have notecards with my main points. I don't NEED to quote Scripture to successfully debate him."

"You seem awfully confident."

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't be a candidate for ordination or a Sunday School teacher or a catechist. And I sure as heck wouldn't spend as much time in church as I do! Besides, I'm pretty sure that I'll have him completely discombobulated with my first question."

"I suppose that makes sense," Melody replied.

"And, as I said, it's also the case that I really have nothing to lose here. He's created a forum where I'm going to expose a few hundred students to Orthodox theology, which they might never have heard. But even that's not the most dangerous thing for him; it's his own people who will be here, in whom seeds of doubt may grow. The few people from my church here aren't going to run off to his Calvinist church because they've been taught about what his church teaches and know how to answer."

"Really?"

"Sure. In the course of Sunday School teaching about the Ecumenical Councils, they've learned about the deviations from the faith. But even more, we teach our High School kids about other religions -- Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and so on.

When people leave the church, it tends to be for practical or secular reasons, not theological ones. Marriage to someone who isn't Orthodox is the number one reason; atheism or agnosticism come a distant second. And theological disagreement barely registers, at least in my experience."

"Interesting."

"We're starting to receive more converts as we've moved away from the ethnic foundations of the churches here in the US. Heck, YOU were considering becoming Orthodox if things had worked out between us."

"Dodged THAT bullet!" Melody teased. "I couldn't be a pastor's wife."

"No kidding," I said with a smile. "Nor the wife of a deacon, which is the office to which I'll be ordained next Summer; I won't be a pastor."

"If you're all set, I need to go check with the Rev."

"I am."

"Bust him up!" she said with a smirk.

I nodded, and as she walked away, I went to sit on the stool behind the left-hand podium. When Reverend Saddler came onto the stage a few minutes later, I got up and met him halfway between the podiums and we shook hands. We both took our places at our podiums and Melody got the attention of the gathered throng. She outlined the rules, then introduced both of us. I'd agreed that Reverend Saddler could go first, having a good idea what he would say.

"Brothers and sisters in Christ, assembled students, and other guests," he began. "This event was advertised as a debate between two men, but it is not. It is, rather, a debate between the Word of God and the word of man. There is but one

source for Christian teaching, and it is the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. It isn't found in tradition, or liturgy, or sacraments, or saints, or fancy vestments, all of which simply serve man and have no value. Rather, it is found solely in the Word of God.

"There is but one path to salvation, and it is through Jesus Christ alone, by faith alone, as taught by Scripture alone, by God's grace alone, with glory to God alone. There is, literally, nothing we can do to earn salvation -- it is the free gift of God bestowed on the elect, determined before the foundation of the world. We are helpless without God, utterly lost, and it is, in fact, impossible for us to choose to love God. It is only by his predestined grace that we can be saved. All of that, my friends, is from the Scriptures. And it really ought to end any debate right there."

I hadn't prepared an opening statement because I felt it was better to listen to what he had to say first and lay the groundwork to undermine him.

"Good afternoon," I began. "Reverend Saddler is quick to dismiss tradition, liturgy, saints, and vestments as having no value, and yet, he and his church make use of all of them. One point of contention in arranging this discussion was that I not be permitted to wear my cassock. You see me in it because, as I pointed out, Reverend Saddler is wearing what amounts to liturgical clothing. His church regularly uses a defined liturgy. His church practices two sacraments. His Bible is a product of tradition. Saints in Heaven praying are found in the Bible in the Revelation to John. These are facts, and they are inescapable.

"Where we agree is that salvation comes through Jesus Christ, but we disagree almost completely about how that is accomplished. I believe we can boil that down to where we've put our focus -- he believes God's judgment and righteous anger override every other consideration; I believe God's love is the most powerful force in the universe. He insists that sin is the most powerful force in the universe, so powerful, in fact, that it can utterly destroy that which God

called 'good'. I believe there is nothing more powerful than God's love, and in that love, he gives us the necessary grace to choose to love Him."

"Per the rules, Mike has the first question," Melody said. "Please remember that this is meant to be a discussion, so please allow each other to answer."

I nodded, "I want to start simply. Let's discuss how we worship. Reverend, you condemned liturgy, and yet you use a regular order of service every Sunday. You condemned liturgical clothing, and yet you wear what amounts to the required clothing for your office as Youth Pastor. You rejected sacraments, and yet you practice both baptism and the Eucharist, though you call it by a different name. Would you explain, please, how it's wrong for us to do it but OK for you to do it?"

"I want to point out," he replied, "first of all, that I'm wearing a business suit, not vestments or liturgical clothing, while Mike is wearing robes."

He paused, so I decided to answer immediately.

"You're wearing proper street clothing for someone of your position," I said. "based on cultural norms of the 1930s through 1950s," I replied. "That was a time when men wore business suits to baseball games, which they no longer do in the usual case. I'm wearing proper street clothing for someone of my position, based on cultural norms of the 4th century. I'd no more go into my church for a service in blue jeans than you would!"

"Proper dress isn't the same as vestments!"

I smiled, "Other than two deans, do you see anyone else in this room in a suit and tie?"

"A business suit is proper attire for this kind of situation."

I nodded, "It is. Just as my cassock is. Would you be permitted to preach in your church in blue jeans and a T-shirt?"

"You're completely missing the point!" he protested.

"Am I? I'm simply pointing out you have a specific dress code, and so do we. Yours is about 1500 years later than ours, that's all. But even so, the norms you follow are from several decades ago when men simply didn't go out unless they were properly dressed."

"I believe there is a difference. Not to mention the robes you wear in church."

"Ah, you mean the formal wear of the 4th century?" I asked. "Akin to the modern business suit? Something worn for at least ten centuries before it was discarded by the Reformers, who, in many cases, continued to wear clerical garb, albeit simplified. Pictures of Martin Luther show him wearing something very similar to what I am wearing, for example."

"But not worn by the Apostles or the early church!"

And he walked right into what amounted to a trap, even though I hadn't specifically set out to lay one.

I grinned, "I daresay what I'm wearing is MUCH closer to what they wore than a modern business suit!"

There was soft laughter from the crowd, and Reverend Saddler didn't reply, so I nodded to Melody, who informed Reverend Saddler he could ask the next question.

"Mike made a comment in his opening remarks which flies directly in the face of the Scriptures. Even if we accept his erroneous theory that *sola scriptura* is not true, a clear refutation of his thinking ought to put an end to any discussion." He opened his Bible and continued, "In Romans, Paul writes '*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*'. There you have it, a plain, simple statement of the plan of salvation. God predestines. Period."

I nodded, "God DOES predestine, but it is the Church, the Body of Christ, which is predestined, *not* the individual believer. In the underlying Greek, the better reading there is '*in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good*' which is exactly what I've said. Loving God comes FIRST, and then predestination. If that's true, then it must be the Church which is predestined and glorified, not the individual believer. And we know, too, from the Scriptures, that mere belief is insufficient. It's quite clear from the parable of the 'Sheep and the Goats' that the only difference between them is what they did and didn't do, something confirmed by James. In his letter, in the only place in the entire Scriptures where the words 'by faith alone' appear, they are preceded by the word 'not'."

"You're twisting the Scriptures by claiming to understand the underlying Greek when nobody here can verify!"

I grinned, "Sure they can. Would you read the second footnote for that verse in your NIV?"

He looked down to the bottom of the page and frowned. I had him trapped, and this WAS a trap I had laid to set up for the next point. He didn't say anything for

a good thirty seconds, trying to formulate an answer which I knew couldn't come. He cleared his throat.

"It, uh, says, '*in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good*'."

I nodded, "Hidden in a footnote. Just as the word 'tradition' is hidden in footnotes in your Bible whenever Paul uses it in a positive way. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, the NIV says, '*So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter*'. Would you look that up, please? And read the footnote for that verse?"

He flipped to the correct page and once again didn't speak for several seconds, and cleared his throat nervously.

"The footnote says '*or traditions*'."

I nodded, "Yes, it does. In the King James, the New American Standard, the New King James, and the Revised Standard Version, it reads 'tradition'. And, in fact, whenever the Greek word «παράδοσεις» (*paradosis*) is used in a negative sense, in the NIV it's translated 'traditions', and whenever it's used in a positive sense, it's translated in the NIV 'teachings'. That's intentional and is meant to deceive.

"The correct translation is hidden in a footnote and won't show up in a concordance. That said, the verse STILL supports the idea of tradition because it instructs the Thessalonians to follow Paul's teachings whether by letter, that is, what we now call Scripture, or orally. In other words, teaching passed down from one believer to the next by word of mouth. Or, to put it succinctly, tradition."

He stared at me, wordless, waiting for the next question.

XXXI. Sinners and Saints

November 3, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"That was fantastic, Mike!" Melody gushed when the debate ended about two hours after it had begun.

"He served me up a series of fastballs right over the plate," I replied. "His mistake was attacking externals at first because that put him on the wrong foot from the get-go. If he had focused purely on theology, I wouldn't have been able to score so many points with what amounted to 'zingers'."

"You had him too tied up in knots trying to explain how he knew what books were in the Bible! Once he had to admit that he accepted the list created by the Reformers uncritically, he was toast! And the real zinger was when you pointed out that he accepted the Jewish canon for the Old Testament instead of the Christian one. I never realized there was a difference."

"As I said, the Septuagint, which you'll see abbreviated with Roman numerals as 'LXX', was the Old Testament for Greek-speaking Christians."

"He was dumbfounded when you pointed out that Paul quotes it, as do the writers of the earliest Christian documents we have outside the Bible."

"The problem with *sola scriptura* is not that it depends solely on Scripture, but that it often leads people to read nothing except the Scriptures, and thus not understand how they were collected, preserved, and used by the early church. Our church IS scriptural, and we don't teach anything which is in contradiction to the Scriptures; we just don't limit our theology to only that which can be derived directly from Scripture."

"Mike?" a young woman asked, coming up to us.

"Yes?"

"How can I find out more about what your church teaches?"

"I want to know as well," a young man who was with her said.

"The best thing you can do is come to church," I replied. "But if you want to read, get a copy of the book *The Orthodox Church* by KALISTOS Ware, though you might find the author listed as Timothy Ware. But honestly, come to Vespers on a Saturday night, and you'll see."

"You two aren't students here, are you?" Melody asked.

"No. We're in High School. Reverend Saddler is our Youth Pastor."

Melody smiled broadly, "Then you should absolutely check out Mike's church."

"Where is it?" the young woman asked.

"Just off Ohio 159, about five miles north of town," I replied. "Saint Michael the Archangel Orthodox Church. Vespers are at 6:00pm on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and Matins and the Divine Liturgy start on Sundays at 8:00am. I'd suggest coming to Vespers, which is an evening prayer service that lasts just under an hour. What are your names?"

"I'm Alyssa, and this is Mark."

"Nice to meet you both," I replied.

"Are you a pastor?"

I shook my head, "No. My pastor is over there in the cassock. I'm a subdeacon, which basically means I assist during the services. I also teach Sunday School and catechism. Are your parents here?"

"No. Why?"

"Just curious. From past experience, they might not be happy about you learning about the Orthodox faith."

"But what we heard today makes so much more sense than what Reverend Saddler is teaching us!"

"I agree, obviously, but just be careful. I do hope to see you both."

"Thanks!"

They moved off, and Clarissa, Jocelyn, Robby, and Lee all came over to where Melody and I were standing.

"You kicked his ass!" Robby grinned. "He slunk out of here like a whipped dog!"

"What's up with the cute guy and his friend?" Lee asked with a smirk.

"They're interested in checking out the church. I didn't know you went for High School boys!"

"You're engaged to a High School girl!" he grinned, causing everyone to laugh.

"True," I admitted.

"How the hell can anyone be a pastor and be that clueless?" Jocelyn asked.

"Because somebody handed him a Bible and told him he didn't NEED to know anything else," I replied. "I met an Arab priest once who said that Islam is what you get when you apply the principles of the Reformation to Orthodoxy, and Protestantism is what you get when you apply them to Roman Catholicism. In each case, they focus on their Scriptures as the literal words of God, to the exclusion of pretty much everything else. That's a simplification, I know, but he has a point. Your Lutheran church taught you about what you call other denominations, right?"

"Sure. And I know at one point, there were talks between the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran reformers, but nothing really came of those talks. And we learned about the Ecumenical Councils, of course, because we generally agree with their, uhm, I know there's a word, but I don't remember it, so I'll just say teachings about Christ."

"Christology," I replied. "Nobody taught him any of that. He views the world as having two camps -- those who are in his church and saved and everyone else. Well, I suppose other similar churches to his are probably OK, too. But you heard my point about the thousands of Protestant denominations and independent churches which can't agree on basic theology despite claiming it comes from the Scriptures. Faith Bible Church, Our Savior Lutheran, and First Methodist don't agree on a whole lot of things, except that the Roman Catholics are wrong!"

Jocelyn laughed, "That's kind of a given, isn't it?"

"Probably the ONLY thing we agree with that is taught by all the Protestant churches!"

"Well, I'd say you won, big time," Clarissa said. "But I don't think there was much doubt. Those footnotes in his Bible buried him."

"Well, one thing is for sure," Robby said gleefully, "he's unlikely to come back here."

"You think this was enough to deter him?" Clarissa asked.

"Think about it. If Mike just walks up to him, he's lost any chance of an audience. They're better off just waiting until Mike graduates or sending someone new. And if those kids leave the church, I bet there will be hell to pay."

"Maybe we should have let him fill the room with his people!" Melody said.

"Who knows how many people you might have swayed!"

"Actually," Jocelyn said, "the laughter and applause from the assembled students was part of why Mike was so effective. Mike came across as funny, personable, and engaging. Not sure how THAT happened, but it did."

"Gee, thanks," I replied flatly.

"Remember, I knew you in High School! Would Mike Loucks, the chess-playing nerd, have even considered doing this? Or been able to do it?"

"No."

"The contrast between who you used to be and who you are is pretty amazing. And compared to the harsh, soulless preacher, you were easily the crowd favorite. And that means people are more receptive to your message."

"The best part is you inoculated the campus against him," Lee said. "Nobody who was here is going to listen to him."

"Michael?" Father Nicholas said, coming up to me. "May I speak with you privately?"

"Of course," I replied, then said, "Excuse me," to my friends.

Father Nicholas and I moved to a quiet corner of the room.

"Very good job today," he said. "Though a bit less ridicule would have been better."

"I understand," I replied. "But he kept serving up chest-high fastballs over the plate. It was too easy to knock them out of the park."

"True, but you did play it for laughs at times."

"I did," I admitted.

"Please don't take this as an objection to your style; just dial it back slightly so you can't be accused of making fun of someone."

"Yes, Father."

"That said, I laughed just as hard as everyone else did! You have a very disarming, folksy style that really worked well with today's audience. If it weren't for your medical training, I'd suggest campus ministry was right up your alley. I think your success in teaching Sunday School to young adults shows that to be the case as well."

"And that is something I think I'd enjoy, having done this. But, as you say, my medical training basically prevents it. Maybe after I complete my Residency."

"Don't stop witnessing, Mike. You're very effective."

"Two High School students came up to me and asked about learning more. They go to Reverend Saddler's church. I invited them to Vespers."

"I had one man come up and talk to me in the same way. He's been struggling with his faith and said you provided a very different take, one that he wants to investigate."

"You know Reverend Saddler could have done a much better job, right?" I asked.

Father Nicholas nodded, "He started down what amounts to an anti-Catholic path when he should have stuck to basic theology. Granted, you'd still have prevailed, but the in-depth conversation would have prevented the laughter and completely blunted your message. It was a tactical error on his part."

"One I was sure he would make after talking to him that day on the sidewalk. I didn't even get to use my best line!"

Father Nicholas laughed, "About Santa Claus slapping Arius?"

"Exactly!"

"And now I see a certain young lady who I believe needs your attention!"

I received Father's blessing and went over to where Elizaveta was standing with Tasha, Nik, Elias, Oksana, and Viktoriya.

"I loved it!" Elizaveta said. "You did just as I hoped!"

"Thank you."

"Very good, Subdeacon," Nik said. "I enjoyed it immensely."

"I'm sorry I was a bit irreverent to him," I said to Nik, knowing his take on public behavior.

Nik smiled, "I believe he set himself up for that. I'm not sure the holiest monk could have resisted the opportunity to put him in his place in that way."

"Thank you. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to spend some time with Elizaveta."

"Of course!"

I took her hand, and we walked from the auditorium and out into the chilly Fall air and headed towards the dorm.

"I need to put my cassock away," I said. "And I'm sorry you'll have to wait in the lobby. I'll only be five minutes."

"I know. I don't like it, but it's OK."

We arrived at the dorm; I hurried upstairs, took off my cassock, folded it, and put it in my bag, then grabbed my light jacket and baseball cap and went back downstairs. I took Elizaveta's hand, and we walked to Doctor Blahnik's house so we could have some privacy.

"You did a GREAT job, Mike," Doctor Blahnik said when we arrived. "It was almost enough to make me want to go to church again. Almost!"

I chuckled, "When was the last time you were in church?"

"Other than weddings or funerals? When I was about five, I think. My grandmother used to take me to church."

"Do you mind if we use the music room?" I asked.

"Not at all. Derek is picking me up in about ten minutes, so you'll have the house to yourself."

"Thanks."

Elizaveta and I went into the music room, and I shut the door behind us. I led her over to the couch, and after I sat down, she sat on my lap, drew her legs up, and put her head on my shoulder.

"I like when you hold me," she said softly.

"And I like holding you," I replied.

"Kiss me?" she asked, raising her head from my shoulder.

Our lips touched, and then our tongues and we shared a gentle French kiss. When we broke it after about two minutes, Elizaveta sighed and put her head on my shoulder again.

"Six-and-a-half months..." she whispered.

I had the same desire, but it had to wait for a host of reasons. We cuddled for a bit, then exchanged several more soft French kisses. I very much wanted to cup her firm, full breast, but even that was off limits, and doing so might put us on the road to violating our promise to Father Nicholas, as well as the law, so I exercised self-control, something which had been lacking for the past few years.

We stayed at Doctor Blahnik's house for about an hour before we needed to leave to head to church for Vespers. After Vespers, I took Elizaveta home, then headed back to campus to hang out with my friends.



November 9, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday, I had my usual date with Elizaveta while everyone else went on dates or to an off-campus party. After I dropped her at home, I headed back to campus and went to my room. Nobody else had returned, so I put on *Stop Making Sense* by Talking Heads and sat down to read *The Hunt for RED OCTOBER*, a novel Viktor Kozlov had given me about a Lithuanian submarine captain in the Soviet Navy who decided to defect to the West. It wasn't my usual genre, as I strongly preferred science fiction, but I found it engrossing. I read for about an hour before Clarissa came into the room.

"Hey, Petrovich!"

"Hey, Lissa! No Jocelyn?"

"She and Bill wanted some privacy."

"And Abby?"

"Has to be up early tomorrow. What are you reading?"

"A spy novel about a Soviet sub commander who tries to defect to the US."

"Not exactly your usual fare."

"I know, but I'm actually enjoying it. What about the rest of the gang?"

"José and Sarah went out with Lara and Tommy and Dona and her boyfriend. Sophia, Robby, and Lee went to an off-campus party. Not sure about Sandy and Pete. How was your date?"

"The usual -- dinner and some time together. How was the movie?"

They'd gone to see *Body Double*, which was rated 'R'.

"Sexy as hell, but there were some gruesome scenes, too."

"We haven't talked as much these past few weeks," I said. "How are things with Abby?"

"Good. I'm considering moving in with her instead of moving into the room at Doctor Blahnik's house."

"I half-expected that. You guys are pretty chummy!"

"Only you could call two girls who fuck each other 'pretty chummy'!"

"Yes, but I meant more than sex, you goofball, and you know it!"

"I know," Clarissa agreed. "This is way different from Glenda."

"How so?"

"It seems more intimate, deeper. I suppose it's because Abby and I got closer than Glenda and I did before we went to bed together."

"I prefer Abby, if that matters."

"It does, obviously! If you two didn't get along really well, we'd have serious problems with the amount of time you and I are going to spend together for the next six or seven years. That's why I want to spend time with Elizaveta, too. If she doesn't trust me implicitly, it'll be a disaster."

"In her mind, you're a lesbian, so the notion that you and I would be physically involved is outside the realm of possibility. Does Abby know about us?"

Clarissa shook her head, "She knows I had one heterosexual love affair, but not who I was with; she assumes it was in High School, and I felt it was better to leave it that way. I don't think she even suspects it was you because of how we behaved in public. Almost nobody knows. The only better-kept secret is that Kimiko has a new octopus!"

I chuckled, "I figured, but I also felt it wasn't my business. I'm assuming it's Brandon."

"Who else? Also, I'm not sure if you care or not, but I saw Maggie tonight. She was with a guy who looked to be about four or five years older than us, brown hair, decent looking, mustache, nice build."

"Mike Palmer," I replied. "Well, I'm going to guess, anyway. She had a crush on him when she was younger, and her dad really wanted her to date him rather than me. Did you say anything to her?"

"No. I didn't want to cause trouble either way. They were going in to see *A Nightmare on Elm Street*."

"Slasher movies are not my thing."

"Me, either. I saw *Friday the 13th* and decided not to see any other movies like that."

"Ditto. I meant to ask, did you hear back from your parents about Thanksgiving?"

"Mom wants me there, but Dad isn't thrilled. I'll probably go. What are you doing?"

"If you're going home, then for sure, I'll go to Elizaveta's. Otherwise, I was strongly considering Doctor Blahnik's invitation because I'll be staying there."

"I bet that would go over well with the new in-laws! Not to mention your pussy cat!"

"I'd have invited her to Doctor Blahnik's, and she'd have said 'yes'. And I could talk with Viktor Kozlov to smooth things over. He knows you're my best friend and has a general idea you had trouble at home. I take it you'll be gone all week?"

"Yes. My mom will come to get me on Saturday morning and bring me back the following Saturday."

"What about Abby?"

"I'd really like to take her home, but I don't want to have any more conflict at home than I'm already expecting. It's so dumb, really, but for now, it's better to just work on my relationship with them. I swear, if you came home with me and fucked me on the dinner table while dad was carving the turkey, they'd be more OK than if Abby came along and we slept in separate rooms!"

"That might be a bit of an exaggeration," I grinned.

"Maybe, but only a bit. Your dad would be ecstatic with Liz living with any guy if she dumped Paul."

"I'm not sure ecstatic is the right word, but it would relieve some of the tension in the family."

"Are things any better?"

"I don't know the inner workings of my parents' relationship, but I have the ominous feeling."

"You think they might break up?"

"Given my dad's attitude, and with the priests and me pushing my mom to reconcile with Liz, I think it's possible. And I feel somewhat responsible."

"Jesus, Petrovich! It's not your fault!"

"No, but by pushing my mom to work on restoring her relationship with Liz, I'm driving a wedge between my parents."

"Have you thought about talking to him again?"

"I have, but given what he said last time, I'm not sure how much good it will do. I told you what he said about Elizaveta."

"That's his anger talking, I'm sure, given everything you said about how things went down when they found out Liz was sleeping with Paul. You told me you gave your gun to your friend's parents for safekeeping because of his temper."

"True."

"And honestly, you've told me your dad was totally non-confrontational and would hide out in his workshop when he disagreed with your mom. Don't you think this has been building?"

"I guess," I sighed. "But it sucks."

"I know. I was a bit worried about my parents when my dad basically ran away to avoid seeing us on our last visit, but he's calmed down enough that I can go home alone. It's a step, kind of like your mom and Liz."

"The real question will be what happens with regard to Liz's wedding. If my mom goes, and my dad finds out, that might just be the end."

The phone rang, and I got up to answer it.

"Mike? It's Sophia."

"Sophia? What's going on?"

"Would you mind coming to Moore Memorial Hospital to pick up Robby, Lee, and me?"

"What are you doing there?"

"Three guys took exception to Robby and Lee dancing together and started a fight. Lee broke his wrist defending himself."

"But he's otherwise OK? And Robby?"

"The karate training paid off and they're OK otherwise. The cops just left, and Lee has a cast."

"OK. I'll be there in ten minutes."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up.

"What happened?" Clarissa asked.

"Robby and Lee got jumped by some «мудаки» (*mudaki*), and I guess Lee has a broken wrist, but otherwise, they're OK." ("assholes")

"Jumped?"

"Sophia said some guys took exception to them dancing together."

"Shit!"

"I know. I need to go get them, but my Mustang only holds four."

"I'll be here when you get back."

"Thanks, Lissa."

I grabbed my jacket, baseball cap, wallet, and keys and hurried from my room. Fifteen minutes later, Sophia, Robby, and Lee got into my car for the drive back to campus.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Some asshole decided we shouldn't dance together and started harassing us," Robby said. "We ignored him, but his two buddies joined in and started shoving us around. I doubt they'll try it again."

"How bad?" I asked.

"One has a broken nose, one has a wrecked knee, and the third one ran away. The cops got him later."

"You guys aren't in any trouble, are you?"

"No. A dozen witnesses said the assholes started it and attacked us. All we did was defend ourselves. And we followed the dōjō rules of blocking, warning, and then kicking the shit out of them."

"How did you break your wrist, Lee?" I asked.

"One of the assholes blindsided me and tackled me. I landed wrong. But an elbow to his nose put him out of commission. The other dude who was hurt was going to kick me when I was down, and Robby kicked his knee from the side."

"He went down like the sack of shit he is," Sophia said. "That's when the third guy ran off. I'm pretty sure the guy's going to need reconstructive surgery on the knee."

"Were the three guys students?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "I haven't seen them around campus, but that doesn't mean anything."

"What did the cops say?"

"They arrested all three of them, but obviously, two of them are in the hospital right now."

"How's the wrist feel, Lee?"

"Hey, man, I don't feel ANYTHING," he grinned. "Whatever they gave me is working great!"

"Percocet," Sophia added. "He wouldn't feel a kick in the nuts right now!"

"Let's not find out," Lee laughed. "But man, do I feel good!"

"What's in that?" I asked.

"Oxycodone and paracetamol, which is acetaminophen, like in Tylenol."

"I bet those pills cost a lot more than if he bought a bottle of Tylenol and some opium to smoke!" I chuckled.

"True, but there's no jail time for the pills!" Robby said.

When we arrived back on campus, the four of us went to my room, where Clarissa was waiting, along with José, Sarah, Lara, and Tommy.

"You OK?" José asked Lee when we walked in.

"Feeling no pain!" he grinned.

"Painkillers," Robby clarified.

"What happened?"

"Three assholes decided they don't like two guys dancing together and tried to bash us. They didn't realize we've been going to karate for three years."

"Like that thing, you told us about that happened in July in Maine?" José asked.

"Yeah, but these assholes picked on the wrong gay guys."

"Did you report them?" Lara asked.

"The cops arrested all three of them," Sophia said. "Two of them were conveniently waiting for the police to arrive -- one was bleeding profusely from his broken nose, and the other one was writhing in pain from the kick Robby administered to the side of his knee. The third idiot ran, but the cops got him. Robby, you should probably put Lee to bed."

"Good idea," Robby replied. "Come on, Lee."

They got up, said 'goodnight', and headed for their room. The rest of us hung out for a bit, then everyone went to their rooms. I said my evening prayers and got into bed.



November 10, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday, about ten minutes before Vespers was supposed to start, Viktor Kozlov came to the deacon's door and told me there were two people looking for me. With Father's blessing, I went out the door and walked to the narthex. I was pleased to see Alyssa and Mark, the two teens who had spoken to me after the debate.

"Hi," I said. "Welcome!"

"What do we do?" Alyssa asked.

"I'll get you each a copy of the service book so you can follow along, but for now, just observe. I'll be happy to talk with you after the service, if you want to stay around. I'm sure you'll have questions."

"Cool," she replied.

I retrieved a pair of service books from the rack and showed Mark and Alyssa the correct pages. I also handed them copies of the bulletin inserts, which had the hymns and hagiography for the saints being commemorated -- Theodore the Studite, the Holy Martyr Menas, and Blessed Maximus of Moscow, Fool-for-Christ. I led them into the nave to stand near Elizaveta and her family, then returned to the altar for the service.

When we finished Vespers, Father Nicholas and I went to the vestry to remove our liturgical garb. Once we'd done so, I introduced Mark and Alyssa to Father Nicholas. They spoke briefly while I said 'goodbye' to Elizaveta, and when I returned, Father Nicholas left.

"What year are you in?" I asked.

"We're Seniors," Alyssa replied.

"Do your parents know you're here?"

"No. We usually go out on Saturday nights, so it's not like they'll be suspicious or anything. Why are you concerned?"

"I've seen some pretty bad reactions from parents in the past when their kids have begun to investigate Orthodoxy. That's especially true if they go to a Bible church or one in the Baptist tradition."

"Reverend Saddler did warn us about following false teachers who used guile to trick us."

I grinned, "I'm sure he did. But did you think I was using guile? Or trickery?"

"No."

"And I'll point out that if his theology is correct, the only way you could be tricked out of your faith is if you weren't one of the elect anyway, and at that point, the question I'd have is why he was wasting his time on reprobates who he cannot help in any way shape or form! May I ask what it was that I said that piqued your interest?"

"For me, it was when you talked about God's love," Alyssa said. "And how you just presented the truth in a way that was easy to understand."

"For me," Mark said, "it was the Scripture you quoted, from memory, that really got to me. Especially when you pointed out that '*sola fide*' isn't biblical at all. And that the version of the Scriptures Reverend Saddler and our Pastor insist we use is purposefully mistranslated."

"Then I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

"Can you explain everything in your, uhm, worship room?" Mark asked.

"We call this part of our temple the 'nave', a word which has the same root as the word 'navy' and means ship. Think of it as akin to Noah's Ark, if you will, carrying the Christians to salvation in the way the ark carried Noah's family and the animals to safety during the flood."

"What's with the wall between where you and your pastor were standing?" he asked.

"The icon screen stands between the nave and the altar, which is the entire area behind it. It's meant to bring to mind the 'Holy of Holies' in the old temple, and the curtain, which is drawn aside before the service, is meant to call to mind the tearing of the curtain in the temple after the crucifixion. Everything we do has some kind of symbolism, in that it manifests the reality it represents."

"And the, uhm, images on the wall?" Alyssa asked. "You worship them?"

I shook my head gently, "No. We reverence icons; we don't worship them. First, they represent the 'great cloud of witnesses' in Hebrews 12. And we know from Revelation 6 that the saints in Heaven can pray for us on earth and are aware of what is happening here. We can, therefore, ask them to intercede on our behalf, just as we can ask each other to pray for us. As for kissing the icons, it's a sign of respect, just as kissing the priest's or the bishop's hand is a sign of respect. And that respect is paid to the saint who is manifested for us by the icon. Only God is due worship."

"But the way you speak about Mary..." she said.

I smiled, "What happened at the Wedding at Cana?"

"Jesus turned water to wine," she replied.

"Just because? Or did someone ask him?"

"They ran out of wine, so they went to Jesus, and he made more."

"I think you missed an important point. Who actually asked him?"

"Mary!" Mark declared. "The servants went to his mom and convinced her to ask him."

"Yes. And he told her 'no' but she didn't take 'no' for an answer, and her insistence caused him to perform his first miracle. We call her *Theotokos*, which means 'God-bearer', which is quite literally true, as God was incarnate in her womb. So the point is, we can ask her to intercede on our behalf."

"And you know who all of these people are?" Alyssa asked.

I nodded, "In many cases, the name or event is written in Greek or Slavonic, and in others, there are clues. You'll see on the icons of Christ letters which look like the Latin characters 'IC' and 'XC', which is an abbreviation for 'Jesus Christ'. On icons of Mary, you'll see «MP» «ΘΥ», which is an abbreviation for the Greek 'Mother of God'."

"Why are there no chairs or pews?" Mark asked.

"Traditionally, Orthodox Christians stand for worship, but we also do prostrations, which involve kneeling and touching our heads to the floor, or, in a simpler fashion, bowing and touching the floor with our fingertips. And if you noticed, there was quite a bit of movement during the service. Tomorrow morning, there will be even more moving around. Chairs or pews interfere with those things and regiment people. If you watch, you'll see the youngest kids moving around during the service, sometimes sitting at the feet of their parents or grandparents, sometimes with their godparents, and sometimes with friends. And people will venerate icons as they come into the church or even occasionally during the services. All of that is OK and is hindered by pews or chairs. Some of our churches have them, but I strongly prefer this. And I'm sure you saw some people sitting on benches or on the floor on the Persian rugs."

"You don't have an organ?" Alyssa asked.

"No. All our music is done *a cappella*. Instruments can be very distracting, and our focus should be on the words of the hymns and prayers. That said, you can hear some very good orchestral versions of some of these hymns because the music for our services was composed by Tchaikovsky."

"The Tchaikovsky?"

"Yes. He wrote both choral music for our liturgies and the orchestral music you know. The same is true for Rachmaninoff, who composed quite a bit of liturgical music."

"One thing Reverend Saddler said is that you pray the same pre-written prayers over and over."

"You mean like '*When you pray, pray in this manner*' as Jesus instructed when he gave us the Lord's Prayer?"

"Uh, yeah," Mark replied with a soft laugh.

"And when your pastor does his free-form prayer, is it REALLY free-form? Or does he follow a specific pattern?"

"A pattern."

"Very, very similar to our litanies where a prayer request is made, and the congregation responds with 'Lord have mercy!'. Fundamentally, the very things he is objecting to, your church does in a modified form without even realizing that it mimics what we've done since the days of the Apostles. Has the form developed over time? Sure. And so have the prayers and hymns. It's just that our newest hymns are a few hundred years old, while yours are probably Christian Contemporary Music or hymns written in the last hundred years. And speaking of that, have you listened to anything by Keith Green?"

"Sure," Alyssa replied. "That's where I first heard what you said about the sheep and the goats. But I was told that was talking about how to separate true believers from false believers."

"It is!" I replied. "Those who profess Christ but do not do His works are, as James says, fools. The question is, where do those works come from. We say it's synergy -- man working together with God, enabled by God's grace. Reverend Saddler implies strongly that God is a puppet master, forcing us to do the things He wants. Here's the thing, though -- it makes God into some kind of evil monster. No matter how much you desire salvation, you cannot have it if He didn't select you before you were born. But before you were born, you haven't sinned. Work out what that implies."

"That God punishes us just because he decided to, not for anything we do!" Mark declared.

"That is the implication. There is lots of hand-waving to try to explain that away, but fundamentally, there is no way for a five-point Calvinist to escape the logical conclusion that God, knowingly and intentionally, created the vast majority of humanity for the sole purpose of sending them to Hell to suffer eternal torment, with no chance of salvation. Does that sound like a loving parent or an abusive one?"

"Abusive," Alyssa declared.

"In truth, there is only one way to go to Hell, and that's to choose to go there yourself. God will never send you there. He pours out his love on everyone. If you reject His love, it's pure torture; if you return His love, it's a refining fire. It's your choice. God wishes all to be saved but gives us the choice. Yes, we're enabled by grace, but if there isn't a choice, then it's all just so much puppetry, and, in the end, everything is meaningless because you could live your entire life

as a Christian, sure of your salvation, only to find yourself in Hell. In the end, Calvinism offers NO assurance of any kind. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, assures you that if you love God, salvation is yours for the asking."

"But what about sin?" Mark asked. "Doesn't it matter?"

"Of course it does. Sin creates a separation from God because we miss the mark of perfection. When we fall, the Church helps us pick ourselves up and make a new effort. For most of us, that's a lifelong struggle. If we keep our eyes on the prize and make use of the tools which God provides us through the Church -- fasting, prayer, liturgy, confession, anointing, the Eucharist -- then we'll achieve the goal. I think the best way to say it is that an unrepentant sinner who is not struggling to overcome his sin is declaring, quite clearly, that he or she does not love God."

"Is there any sin which can't be forgiven?"

"I would say there is no sin which can't be forgiven, provided there is true «metanoia» -- repentance and turning away from sin. If pushed, though, I'd say the unforgivable sin is the denial that God can save us."

"So anyone could be saved?" Alyssa asked. "Even Charles Manson?"

"Jesus said, 'I have not come to call the righteous, but to call sinners to repentance'."

"It can't be that simple," she protested.

"Jesus thought it was. As did the men who wrote and preserved the Bible. Forget what your preachers have said, and remember just one thing -- God is love."

"Are you training to be a priest?" Mark asked.

I shook my head, "No. I'm going to medical school next year to be a doctor. The bishop intends to ordain me a deacon next Summer."

"How would someone become Orthodox?" Alyssa asked.

"You'd go through catechism, and then once Father Nicholas was satisfied you were properly taught, you'd be received into the Church. That usually happens on the morning before Pascha -- which is what we call Easter -- but it could happen at other times, too. Have either of you been baptized?"

"No," Mark said. "Usually, that happens when you're a teenager, but neither of us has chosen to be baptized."

"Then you'd be baptized and chrismated, which means anointed with oil, and then you would receive the Eucharist. At that point, you're fully Orthodox. You'd also need to attend church regularly while you were catechumens -- that is, learning the faith so you can be received."

"Would you be the one doing our catechism?" Alyssa asked.

"That would be up to Father Nicholas, but it's likely, yes. Did you get copies of the book I recommended?"

"The bookstore didn't have it," Mark said.

"We have copies which I can give you."

"We can pay for them. Do you have two?"

"Yes, let's go to the church hall, and I'll get them from the bookstore."

We went to the church hall, and I went behind the glass cabinet that held crosses, votive glasses, and icons, unlocked the book cabinet, and took out two copies of the book. Mark handed me a \$20 bill, and I made change and marked down that I'd sold two copies of *The Orthodox Church*. I locked the cabinet, and we walked out to the narthex.

"The only question I have for you," I said, "is what you think your parents will say."

"I'm not sure," Mark said. "But we can come on Saturdays without saying anything. Is that OK?"

"You're more than welcome, and when you're ready to begin studying in earnest, you can speak to Father Nicholas about the next steps."

"Thanks for talking to us!" Alyssa said.

"Thanks," Mark added.

"You're welcome. Do you have any other questions?"

"Not right now, but I'm sure we'll have lots in the future."

"Then I'll see you next weekend!"

I walked them out of the church, and after locking up, I headed back to campus.

XXXII. "Love covers a multitude of sins"

November 13, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday, Elizaveta's dad invited both of her grandfathers to join us for dinner at the country club. I enjoyed talking with them the way I'd always enjoyed talking with my grandfather's friends, much to my mom's displeasure, though that was mostly because of the 'coarse' language I'd picked up from them. All of my conversations with my future in-laws had been in English after they'd asked that first time, and it was quite clear that to them, it was much more important that their granddaughter marry a faithful Orthodox man than marry someone to preserve Russian culture.

"Would you like to hear a very bad joke, Mike?" Valentin asked.

"Sure," I replied, having heard plenty of bad jokes from my grandfather's friends.

He laughed and told the joke:

A Briton, a Frenchman, and a Russian are standing and staring at an icon of Adam and Eve.

"Look at their calm, their reserve," says the Briton. "Surely they must be British!"

"Nonsense!" Replies the Frenchman. "They are beautiful. Surely, they must be French!"

The Russian finally speaks, "They have no clothes, no shelter, only one apple to eat, and are being told this is Paradise. They are Russian."

I actually laughed because not only was it funny, but given the conditions in Russia, completely accurate.

"I have one as well," Nikolay said.

A Russian and American die and go to Hell.

The devil asks them: "What kind of Hell will you choose: Russian or American?"

"What's the difference?" the American asks.

"Well," the Devil replies, "In the American Hell, you eat a bucket of «навоз» (navoz) each day. In the Russian Hell, you eat two buckets." ("manure/dung")

The American chooses the American Hell, but the Russian thought, "All my life I lived in Russia, and I am true Russian! I'll go to Russian Hell!"

About a month later, they meet, and the Russian asks, "How are you?"

The American replies, "Well, today I ate a bucket of «навоз» (navoz) in the morning, and the rest of the day was free. What about you?"

The Russian smiled, "Ah, as always: either «навоз» (navoz) was not delivered or not enough buckets for everyone."

I laughed, though I'd heard that one from one of my grandfather's friends when I was little.

"Mike, who were the young people at Vespers on Saturday?" Valentin asked.

"Two High School Seniors who came to the theological debate at the school. I'd say if they show up again next Saturday, they're inquirers. I think, based on what they said to me and the questions they asked, they'll become catechumens."

"Very good. The Parish Council has talked for years about a campus ministry, but we never had anyone who was interested to lead it."

He had been on the Parish Council for nearly twenty years, though he had asked not to be nominated during the most recent election.

"I spoke with Father Nicholas about that, but given the demands of medical school and, more importantly, the demands of a new wife, it's not practical for me to consider doing that."

"It is not just new wives, Mike!" Nikolay said with a knowing smile.

"As if you have ANYTHING to complain about!" Valentin said, shaking his head. "You married the most beautiful girl in the church, who was sought after by ALL of us!"

"And it has been a very demanding job keeping her happy for nearly fifty years!" Nikolay replied.

"Yes, well, if you weren't such a blockhead..." Valentin said, winking.

I laughed, "I think all of us suffer from that problem."

"And the women are quick to remind us!" Viktor replied. "And apparently, we need reminding quite often!"

"Our bishops fear no man..." I grinned.

"But fear EVERY woman!" Valentin declared, completing the thought. "Vladyka did ask Elizaveta's permission to ordain you, after all!"

I chuckled, "I don't think it was permission, as much as ensuring agreement with his decision. Though, obviously, a 'no' from her would likely have spelt the end of any chance at ordination."

"Quite so," Valentin replied. "Is there anything you need that we can help with?"

"Thank you for the offer, but at this point, it's a matter of finishing my degree and staying out of the way of your wives as they plan the wedding."

"Very wise! Back to the point about the campus ministry. Even if you did not have sufficient time to actively participate, would you at least be willing to work with a small group created by the Parish Council to see if we could make it happen?"

"Within the limitations I mentioned before, I would participate if Father Nicholas gave his blessing for me to do so."

"Viktor, please convey this to the Parish Council at the next meeting."

"I will. Mike, when will you start attending the monthly Parish Council meetings?"

"Probably not until after my ordination," I replied. "There are just too many demands on my time at the moment. And that means anything which isn't mandatory has to take a back seat. Neglecting my studies, Elizaveta, my family, my new family, and my friends would set a terrible example and create all sorts of potential problems."

"How long will you have to serve at the Cathedral after your ordination?"
Valentin asked.

"Until Protodeacon Seraphim is satisfied, I know how to serve the liturgy as a deacon. I watched Father Deacon Vasily for many years while I was serving as an acolyte at Holy Transfiguration, as well as Father Deacon Grigory when I came to Saint Michael the Archangel and became a subdeacon, so I have much of it committed to memory. I'm hoping it's only a few weeks because school starts about four weeks after the proposed ordination date."

The waiter brought our food, and after I gave the blessing, we began to eat, which limited the conversation to small talk. When we finished eating, we had coffee, and then I headed back to campus to join my study group.



November 16, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday afternoon, after class, I took the things I'd need during break to Doctor Blahnik's house, including my guitar. When I got back, I gave Lee a lift to the hospital so he could have his wrist X-rayed to ensure it was healing properly, which, thankfully, it was. I drove him back to campus, then headed to Elizaveta's house to pick her up for dinner, and then the two of us went to Doctor Blahnik's house for the concert.

"Thank you for letting us do the concert here," I said to Doctor Blahnik when we walked in.

"I'm as offended as you are by a rule which prevents your fiancée from coming into the dorms, but jousting at windmills would do neither of us any good, and it would be Quixotic to try to change the minds of the regents on that issue with the problem we had last year."

"Oh, I know. And I hadn't even thought about it until I spoke with Elizaveta on Wednesday night and she asked if there was any way she could come to the concert. I would have felt like a total jerk taking her home after having dinner while I gave a concert."

"I hope you didn't get into too much trouble!"

"He didn't!" Elizaveta said mirthfully. "I just asked if he could sneak me into the dorm! He thought that was a bad idea, which is why he talked to you on Thursday."

"The last thing Mike wants to do right now is attract negative attention from anyone! One more month and then one more semester, and he's finished."

"Ain't THAT the truth!" I smirked.

"Hey!" Elizaveta exclaimed, smacking my arm.

"If you understood that as being about you, then YOU were thinking the same way!" I teased.

"Doctor Blahnik," Elizaveta asked with a twinkle in her eye. "may I have a private moment to educate my husband?"

Doctor Blahnik laughed and walked out of her study where we were talking, closing the door behind her. Elizaveta proceeded to give me a VERY sexy French kiss and pressed her young, firm body against mine.

"You were saying?" she asked when she broke the kiss.

"Should I just surrender now?" I asked, catching my breath.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Shall we go to the music room?"

"If that's where you want to go right now, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)" I teased.
("Kitten")

"No," she sighed, "but we promised."

"We did," I agreed.

I hugged her, and we left Doctor Blahnik's study and went to the music room where José and Milena were waiting. All our friends, plus some invited guests, filled the music room, so the audience overflowed into the great room. That wasn't really a problem, because with the double doors open, the music could be enjoyed in either room.

José, Milena, and I ran through our usual repertoire with a few new songs, and when we finished, and our friends and guests called for an encore, Milena stood up.

"We're going to do something special tonight," she said. "Elizaveta, would you come to Mike, please?"

She smiled and came to sit on my lap, bringing with her sheet music.

"This is Mike and Elizaveta's song," Milena said.

She sat down at the piano and played the intro to *Up Where We Belong*, and on cue, Elizaveta led off a song we'd practiced several times, including with Milena the day before when Elizaveta had her piano lesson with Doctor Blahnik.

Elizaveta: Who knows what tomorrow brings; In a world, few hearts survive

Mike: All I know is the way I feel; When it's real, I keep it alive; The road is long, there are mountains in our way; But we climb a step every day

Duet: Love lift us up where we belong; Where the eagles cry on a mountain high; Love lift us up where we belong; Far from the world we know, where the clear winds blow

Mike: Some hang on to "used to be"; Live their lives, looking behind

Elizaveta: All we have is here and now; All our life, out there to find

Mike: The road is long, there are mountains in our way; But we climb them a step every day

Duet: Love lift us up where we belong; Where the eagles cry on a mountain high; Love lift us up where we belong; Far from the world we know, where the clear winds blow

Mike: Time goes by; No time to cry; Life's you and I; Alone, baby

Duet: Love lift us up where we belong; Where the eagles cry on a mountain high; Love lift us up where we belong; Far from the world we know, where the clear winds blow; Love lift us up where we belong; Where the eagles cry on a mountain high; Love lift us up where we belong

Everyone leapt to their feet, and the applause seemed thunderous, despite there being only about fifty people in the two rooms. Elizaveta gave me a chaste kiss, and we stood up and bowed. Our closest friends gathered close around.

"Damn, Petrovich," Clarissa exclaimed. "You two made ME cry!"

"Me, too!" Jocelyn added. "Amazing."

"Thanks," I replied, slipping my arm around a beaming Elizaveta.

"I hadn't heard this before either," José said. "Just wow!"

"What he said!" Sarah added.

"«Это было удивительно» (*eto bylo udivitel'no*)!" Lara said to Elizaveta. ("That was amazing!")

"«Спасибо» (*spasibo*)!" Elizaveta replied with a smile. ("Thank you!")

"She called it 'amazing'," Clarissa whispered to Jocelyn.

"First-dance song?" Jocelyn asked.

"Yes," I replied. "We thought about keeping this for later, but once we decided to move the concert here, we agreed to do it."

"How long have you been practicing?"

"A few weeks," I replied. "But Elizaveta sings in the choir at church on Feast days and fills in occasionally on Sundays."

Everyone got refreshments, and we were congratulated personally by just about everyone in attendance. Unfortunately, because of my commitment to Elizaveta's dad and our desire to avoid any possible issues with Elizaveta's age, we had to leave before most everyone else to get her home.

"That *was* amazing," Elizaveta said as we walked back to campus to get my car. "Even more than when we practiced."

"It's the audience," I replied. "It makes all the difference in the world. I didn't realize it until the first time I sang in public. Somehow, energy just flows from them."

"That was the first time I ever sang in public except church!"

"And you did an amazing job. Our voices worked perfectly together!"

"Just like other things will?" she teased.

"Six months!" I replied.

"Is this where I say it's not fair?" she asked.

"You can, but that won't change anything."

"It's not fair!" she complained.

"Did that make you feel any better?"

"No! But you could!"

"Do you plan to tease me about this all the way until May 26th?"

"Who said I would stop teasing you AFTER we're married?"

"A man can hope," I grinned.

"Good luck with THAT wish, husband!"



November 17, 1984, Milford, Ohio

On Saturday, after saying goodbye to my friends who were heading home for Thanksgiving, Elizaveta and I had breakfast with Paul and Liz in Rutherford, then drove to Milford for our pre-marital counseling session with Doctor Mercer.

"There's been a significant change in your relationship the past month," Doctor Mercer said. "I'm concerned."

We were talking one-on-one after she'd spoken to Elizaveta and me together.

"That did NOT happen, Doc," I grinned. "She's certainly VERY interested in doing that, and so am I, but all we've done is kiss. Nothing more will happen before our wedding. We gave our word to each other, to the priest, and to you."

"You need to be very careful, Mike. Being alone with her is dangerous in that your hormones could easily outrun your willpower."

"Oh, I know, but if I could fend off Tasha for three years, I can handle this situation for six months. Tasha was extremely frustrated because I wouldn't go back on my promise to her."

"And yet you did."

"This is different," I said. "But your advice to be careful makes perfect sense, and we will."

"Do you have any concerns?"

I shook my head, "No. I told you about my initial concerns, but once we had the betrothal ceremony, it was like someone flipped a switch. She is very mature and very much in control of herself and very much in control of our relationship!"

"And you're OK with that?"

"If I wasn't, I sure as heck wouldn't have asked a Russian girl to marry me!"

Doctor Mercer laughed, "You've had some experience in that regard, I'm sure."

"Yeah," I chuckled. "'Some'. But in all seriousness, given what I asked her to sign up for, I think I do need to do my level best to follow her program if you will. Not in the sense that I'll be a wimp or submissive like my dad, but at times I'm going to treat her like crap out of necessity. And that means making absolutely sure her needs are met at other times."

"Do you love her?"

I grinned, "She's growing on me."

"You are a real smart aleck at times."

"It's a work in progress, Doc. She's made more progress in that regard than I have."

"So you noticed that?"

"I'm not a *complete* idiot," I replied.

"No, not 'complete'," Doctor Mercer replied with a silly smile.

"Thanks," I replied flatly.

"You're mostly operating on your decision, not a feeling, while she's mostly operating on feeling now."

"I'd say that's right, but I'm working on it. I really do like her, I really do enjoy spending time with her, I think we're going to make a great couple, and I'm positive I'm going to enjoy the marriage bed -- repeatedly!"

Doctor Mercer laughed, "You do realize that's not enough, though, right?"

"Of course, it's not enough! I'm not ready to say 'I love you' to her and mean it the way she's going to want me to mean it, but that will happen. Everything I've read about arranged marriages indicates it takes time, but so long as you work at it, it often becomes a stronger bond than romantic love. The difference is, I'm not relying on romantic love to get us through the tough times because it won't and it can't. It has to be deeper than that; it has to be «agápē», which is really hard work. And she knows that, too."

"You've talked about it?"

"Not quite that bluntly, but about the hard work we'll have to do to have a successful marriage. It would be a heck of a lot easier if I wasn't going to be a doctor. That just adds a near-infinite amount of stress to the relationship for the first six or seven years. But we're both fully aware of it, and it's why she talked to a doctor's wife before she even approached me."

"Before I speak to Elizaveta alone, how are things at home?"

"Not much has changed as far as I can tell. We're going to stop in and see my parents, though I suspect it'll only be my mom who talks to both of us. I'll try again with my dad, but I don't hold out much hope. But I'm not going to give up unless he tells me to never speak to him again, and even then, I'm not sure that would be enough to give up."

"When is your sister's wedding?"

"December 11th. It's before a judge and supposedly takes less than ten minutes, but I'll be there. Elizaveta's dad signed a permission slip for her to miss two afternoon classes so she can join Jocelyn, Clarissa, and me to support Liz."

"Will your mom be there?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea. If she is, and she's alone, I'm pretty sure that will be a death knell for my parents' marriage."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Shitty," I sighed.

"For you to use that word means you're close to despair."

"Should I be jumping for joy and doing cartwheels?"

"No, of course not! But untreated depression is a dangerous thing, as you well know."

"Jocelyn?"

"And Angie. We tried reducing the anti-depressants a bit, and she began to regress. We put her right back on the necessary dose to bring her back to what's 'normal' for her."

"Cause or symptom?" I asked.

"Both," Doctor Mercer replied. "You know about feedback when you put a mic in front of a speaker? It's like that. The depression intensifies her mild schizophrenia, and that really is the key to keeping her on an even keel. And obviously avoiding triggers, which for her seem to all revolve around sexual

activity, including deep kissing. And no, we have no idea why. We're not giving up, but, to be honest, her best course of action is not to try to have a romantic relationship, ever."

"That sucks," I sighed.

"Unless we can somehow get to the root cause AND fix it, it's the right way to do this. Minimal drug therapy and intensive counseling. You saw how she was and the progress she's made. That's a HUGE win, Mike. The alternative was institutionalization or suicide, either active or passive. You won't like me saying this, but I consider our treatment of Angie a rousing success, given the alternatives AND what we know about her."

"You're right, I don't like that. But the truth doesn't depend on us liking it."

"Something to remember when you're an ER doctor, both for yourself and for your patients."

I nodded, "I'll file that away for the future. What about Mrs. Stephens?"

"I convinced her to go back into counseling. That was a good catch, Mike."

"I don't ALWAYS need to be hit across the forehead with a two-by-four!"

"Your layman's diagnosis of depression was correct. Fortunately, she doesn't need medication, just counseling and support."

"So what DOES happen to Angie when her parents aren't around?"

"If we can get Angie established in her own apartment, with a job which allows her to support herself and a good group of friends, the state provides some level

of care. She won't need anything intensive, just someone checking on her on a regular basis."

"I intend to stay in touch with her," I said firmly.

"I'd have been shocked to hear you say otherwise; just remember you **MUST** put your marriage first."

"I know, Doc."

"I know you know, but you love Angie, and you have for years, and you'll never stop loving her. Don't let that cause you to harm your relationship with Elizaveta."

"I've had the same basic advice from Father Nicholas about Clarissa."

"A risk for different reasons."

"I know, and Father Nicholas and I are working on strategies so she and I can be close friends without putting my marriage at risk because of a moment of weakness."

"It's never 'a moment of weakness', Mike. Every affair builds to an inflection point. Often, neither person recognizes it for what it is until after that point when it's often too late. When all the groundwork is laid, infidelity comes easily."

"Remove thy way far from her, And come not nigh the door of her house," I replied.

"The *Tanakh* has quite a bit of wisdom, especially *Mishlei*, or what you call 'Proverbs'."

"Well, well, well," I grinned. "I learned something new today!"

"You didn't know the Jewish name for the book?"

"I did," I chuckled. "I didn't know YOU did! You told me that your Jewishness was a touchstone of traditions."

"OK, it might be a bit deeper than that," she replied.

"Are you married? Children?"

"Married with two daughters, fourteen and twelve, but that has to be the limit of the personal information I share."

"What happened to colleagues?" I asked with a grin.

"I'm your counselor at the moment. Talk to me about that when you get your MD, except with regard to Angie. We do have to be careful of a dual relationship so long as you want to talk to me in that fashion."

"OK. You explained that once before, and I remember. Sorry."

"No need to apologize; our relationship is a bit different from most counseling relationships, so the lines are blurred a bit. Anything you want to talk about before I speak with Elizaveta?"

"Nothing comes to mind. Do you want to see us again before May?"

"I think that's up to you. I would like to keep in touch about Angie, and obviously, if you want to talk about your parents, I'm here. And, despite my misgivings about a fifteen-year-old girl being engaged, I don't see any specific problems."

"She's not a normal fifteen-year-old girl," I replied.

"No, she's not. She was, to my surprise, properly informed and appropriately mature. I'll testify at the hearing, if there is one and you need me to."

"At a minimum, I'd like you to be there, just in case, given what happened with Tasha's little sister when Family Services tried to interfere."

"Just let me know when a hearing might be held, and I'll make arrangements to be there. I take it you're waiting until after she turns sixteen?"

"Yes."

"A wise move. I'll see Elizaveta now."

I nodded, got up, and left the office, and Elizaveta went in and shut the door. It was about fifteen minutes before Elizaveta opened the door. I got up, and after we thanked Doctor Mercer and said 'goodbye'. We left the office and got in my Mustang for the short drive to Frisch's on Route 50 for lunch.

"She's afraid we aren't going to wait until the wedding," Elizaveta said.

"I think we might get in serious trouble if we do it AT the wedding," I teased.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it!"

"You said 'until'!"

"So is that how it's going to be, 'Greg'? Exact words."

I chuckled, "You've seen the reruns, I take it?"

"Yes, of course! I was born the year the show started. You were six, right?"

"Yes. I watched the show with my parents, along with *Emergency* and *Adam-12*. But I didn't see all the episodes of any of the shows because of church and other stuff. But I do remember the 'exact words' episode of *The Brady Bunch!*"

"Did Doctor Mercer say anything to you?"

"She just expressed her concern because she noticed how comfortable we are together and how close we're becoming."

"Not THAT close! I told her."

"So did I, but it's a good thing, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*). We're becoming a couple."
("Kitten")

"I know," she said with a very big smile.



November 17, 1984, West Monroe, Ohio

"This might be a bit difficult," I said to Elizaveta as I backed into the driveway of my parents' house.

"How so?"

"Trying to get my dad to talk to you will mean having a very difficult conversation with my mom first."

"Do what you need to do, Mike."

"Thanks."

We got out of the car, and I once again debated walking in or ringing the bell and decided to walk in. Mom greeted us, and we went to the kitchen to talk and have tea. My dad was, as he had been during our previous visit, in the basement.

"We had breakfast with Paul and Liz this morning," I said. "Liz said you were unsure about her wedding."

"You know why."

"I do. Do you remember a conversation we had around two years ago, where you said that sometimes it's difficult to see our children as grownups? And you said you'd try to do better?"

"I don't remember those exact words, but I'm sure I said them or something very close to them. And you're about to point out I've forgotten I said it."

"Actually, you haven't," I replied. "You're having that difficulty with Liz and, to a point, with me, but that's not why I brought it up. The thing I want to talk about is that I talked to Dad that same day, and he made me a promise -- that he would love whichever girl I married and treat her as his own daughter. I intend to go downstairs and remind him of that."

"Is this about Liz or Elizaveta?"

"Both, but I'll start with Elizaveta. If I can just get him to speak with her, it's a start."

"I'm not sure how receptive he's going to be."

"What has Father Herman said?" I asked.

"I can't really share what's said in counseling."

"No, you can't. But I have a couple of theories. The thing is, I have a problem because I'm going to need to let Elizaveta in on some family secrets, as well as reveal some things you said in confidence to me."

"We can't do this privately?"

"No, we can't. I'm not going to keep anything that happens from Elizaveta, with two exceptions -- private patient information, which I'm ethically required not to share, and confidences required by my ordination. Beyond that? Complete and total openness and honesty, nothing hidden."

Which also meant answering any questions Elizaveta asked, even if the answers were potentially harmful. That would, along with many other safeguards I was putting in place, help keep me on the straight and narrow during the most stressful times to come. I also knew I'd need to figure out how to tell Elizaveta I had been promiscuous, and I didn't relish that thought, though I would absolutely have to protect the reputations of the young women in question, which meant not sharing any names.

"Because of what happened with Jocelyn?" Mom asked.

"Yes. That destroyed our relationship and nearly killed her. We've spent three years trying to overcome that."

"Go on," Mom sighed with resignation.

"I think Dad is suffering from a toxic mix of Calvinism and guilt," I replied.

"Guilt over not being able to protect Liz from the Kramer brothers and their buddies; guilt over not being able to protect her from Paul in what he saw as an

abusive relationship; guilt about his own behavior with regard to pre-marital sex; guilt about his failure as a father and husband; probable guilt about Becky; and an overriding fear that he and his family have committed sins so grave we're all going to Hell. That last bit is the real problem, too, because it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If he's convinced God can't or won't save him, then God won't. He's depressed and angry, and that's a lethal combination for his soul."

Mom was quiet for a moment, and I sipped my tea while I waited for her to reply. Elizaveta, to her credit, simply sat passively next to me, though I was sure she had questions swirling in her mind.

"May I inquire into how you made that diagnosis?" Mom finally asked.

"Putting together everything I've learned from being his son for nearly twenty-two years, listening to what he had to say, as well as dealing with my own guilt about Jocelyn, Angie, and how I handled everything that happened with Liz. My talks with Doctor Mercer before Elizaveta and I started pre-marital counseling taught me a lot, but they also barely scratched the surface. And I've seen what nagging guilt does to people, including me. But confession works, and, to use a cliché, is good for the soul."

"You don't feel guilty for anything?" Mom asked.

"I feel responsible for everything I've done or not done that has hurt someone or caused them pain, but if confession and receiving the Eucharist heal our souls and our bodies, and we're supposed to have 'no further care for the sins which we have committed', then we shouldn't feel guilty. That doesn't mean we don't learn from our mistakes or that we have no responsibility to right the wrongs we've done, but it DOES mean we aren't to feel guilty.

"For me, responsibility is owning up to your mistakes, going to confession, then righting the wrong, and finally, receiving the 'medicine of immortality' which is

meant, among other things, to assuage guilt and assure us of our salvation. I honestly believe that if Dad can't get past his guilt and despair, it's going to lead to a permanent sundering of our family, and," I added with a sigh, "it may already have."

"Are you planning to confront him?"

"Not in the way I think you mean; I'm just going to remind him what he said to me about loving whichever girl I married and treating her as his own daughter. And I'll do it calmly and in love. How he reacts to that is up to him and is his responsibility. But I do need to know the answer to one important question -- are you going to come to Liz's wedding?"

"You know what that means," Mom replied grimly.

I nodded, "You do have to choose, just as I did. And there's no going back and no do-overs."

"I don't know," she sighed. "I assume you're going to be with Elizaveta's family for Thanksgiving and Christmas?"

"I hate to say it, but coming here is more or less out of the question because of Dad, not to mention needing to serve at Saint Michael for Nativity. Elizaveta and I discussed how we'd handle things in the future, and mostly, we'd celebrate as our family, with our kids, and then make arrangements for other celebrations similar to what Grandpa and Grandma set up with the gathering on Christmas afternoon."

"Mike, what about your other grandparents?" Elizaveta interjected.

"We'll invite them, but we don't see them very often because they live near Chicago."

"They also weren't thrilled with Mike's dad converting to Orthodoxy," Mom said. "But they got over that, at least enough to not make it a point of open contention."

"Which is what I want Dad to do with regard to Liz," I replied. "But first, he has to get past the guilt, and I see accepting Elizaveta as a baby step. Well, maybe more than a baby step, given what he said to me. Elizaveta," I continued, turning to look at my fiancée, "in addition to basically saying I was a child molester because of your age, he called me a 'serial fornicator' because my experience is with more than one girl."

Elizaveta frowned, then tersely said, "We need to talk about that. Privately."

"We do," I agreed. "I hope you'll allow me to finish with my parents first."

"Yes, of course," she replied evenly.

I was sure I was in fairly deep trouble with her, but what Doctor Mercer had said to me was quite true -- had she heard something like that from my dad rather than me, there would have been no recovery. At least in the current circumstances, I had a chance of not having it wreck our relationship.

"Then I'm going to go downstairs and talk to Dad," I said. "Elizaveta, do you mind staying here, please?"

"I don't mind," she replied.

I got up from the table and went downstairs to my dad's workshop.

"Hi, Dad," I said.

"Mike," he replied, not looking up from the piece of wood he was routing with a Dremel.

"I want to ask you about something you said three years ago."

He turned off his tool, took off his safety glasses, and turned to look at me.

"What?"

"You gave me your word that you would love whichever girl I married and treat her as your own daughter. I'm here to collect on that promise."

"And you think you can behave in any way you wish and insist I keep my word?"

"I think your promise was to Elizaveta, even though you didn't know it was to her at that time. She's certainly done nothing wrong unless you think her arranging to marry me on her own initiative somehow disqualifies her from the 'whichever girl' you promised to love as a daughter."

"You and your mom love those rhetorical games which ignore everything except a narrow logical point, don't you?"

"You didn't put any conditions on what you said," I repeated gently. "She's innocent, and yet you intend to punish her and your grandkids because you're angry with me for loving Liz."

"That's a bunch of hand-waving, and you know it! You can't simply make everything you've done go away by claiming the moral high ground of 'love'."

"The Apostle Peter, your patron, wrote, '*Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins*'. I'd say that's about as authoritative

as we're going to get. In fact, in that same passage, he talks about almost the exact situation. Your Bible is on the shelf over your head. Would you read 1 Peter 4? Please?"

Dad frowned but turned around and took down his Bible, flipped to the correct page.

"Out loud, I'm guessing?" he asked.

"Yes."

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For the Gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

He closed the Bible and looked up.

"Now," I said gently, "I don't know about you, but Peter is talking to me when he tells me that the time for blatant sin is over and that it's time to live in the Spirit according to the will of God. Have I sinned? Yes. Gravely? Yes. But I've also confessed and repented and received absolution, along with penance. I've received the Eucharist as medicine to combat my mortality, which is what led me to sin. All I'm asking for is for you to come upstairs and speak with Elizaveta and accept her as your daughter and love her, just as you promised you would.

"The other alternative is to harden your heart further and to refuse to accept her. But then what? Tell Mom she can't see the kids Elizaveta and I are going to have in three or four years? Refuse to see your own grandchildren? Refuse to participate in the Christmas gathering Grandpa and Grandma have each year because I'll be there? Is that really what you want? Is that really the Christian thing to do."

"You're awfully smug."

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"If I come across as smug, I'm sorry. But I have the assurance that God has forgiven my sins and that I'm not going to Hell unless I elect to do so. And you know what? Neither are you! There is no sin so grave that it can't be forgiven, except perhaps the outright rejection of God's love, which is the very definition of Hell, and it is one we make for ourselves! Do you truly, in your heart, believe that God, being 'all good', could intentionally and capriciously withhold His grace from you on what amounts to a whim? You want hand-waving? The total bullshit that one can excuse God for a purely evil act by claiming it's His 'inscrutable counsel' that makes the determination. Well, guess what? If God

makes it IMPOSSIBLE for someone to be saved, then he's responsible for their eternal torment, and that makes him a monster."

"Our sins are responsible for damnation," Dad protested. "Not God."

"Yes, but no matter how much I want to stop sinning, no matter how much I love God, you were taught that it's irrelevant."

"And how do you know you're not deceiving yourself?"

"You just undermined the Calvinist doctrine of 'assurance' because if we can deceive ourselves into thinking we're saved, then nobody can ever know for sure they're saved, and thus they have no assurance! We can argue theology all day long and the Scriptures all day long, but in the end, if we don't have love, it profits us nothing. Come talk to your new daughter, please."

XXXIII. Teaching and Learning

November 17, 1984, West Monroe, Ohio

"What did you say to get your dad to come upstairs?" Elizaveta asked as we climbed into my Mustang for the drive back to McKinley.

"I just insisted he keep his word to you."

"To me? I've never spoken to him until today!"

"The promise he made three years ago to love any girl I married and treat her like a daughter was made to you. Well, assuming I'm not in enough trouble with you that you're going to call off the wedding."

"You said you wanted to be honest with me, but you weren't before."

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"I was truthful insofar as what I said was the truth; it just wasn't the whole truth."

"Your mom asked me not to be too hard on you or judge you."

I smiled, "She would. But you're not her. You're you. I owe you an apology for not being completely forthright."

"Yes, you do. And before we talk more, you've confessed ALL of your, uhm, well, promiscuous behavior to Father Nicholas?"

"Yes."

"And it stopped when?"

"Before I came to your house the first time," I answered, saying a silent prayer of thanks.

I had the feeling that I might have just dodged the bullet and that my promise to Lara, based on my belief that being intimate with her would cloud our judgment, had, in effect, saved my relationship with Elizaveta. I had been fooling around with Grace, Dona, and Jocelyn, and Lara's request had been sufficient for me to stop. That had also saved my ordination, which I hadn't consciously known was at risk, something which should have been at the forefront of my mind.

"And just how extensive is this experience?" she asked, a hint of accusation in her voice.

"Very," I replied. "I knew what you would assume, and I let you assume that. Without saying names, which would be totally inappropriate, I suspect your assumption was correct. But there are others, stretching back to not long after I graduated from High School."

"Why?"

"The first person I was with was someone I had planned to marry, and she would have been the only one, ever. After that, well, to be honest, I liked doing it and justified what I was doing by blaming it on my weakness. I half-heartedly tried to stop a few times but wasn't successful."

"Then what made you stop?"

"A mix of things, but my resolve was cemented once you spoke to me. I told Father Nicholas that whatever it was that was truly driving my sinful behavior had to be controlled and conquered, or I couldn't rightly court you. Or Lara, for that matter."

"May I ask a question?"

"Except for giving names, I'll answer any question you ask," I replied. "And you don't have to ask my permission to ask. I meant what I said at the kitchen table -- total honesty and openness, minus anything I'm ethically bound not to reveal. That's why I admitted my failures to you."

"Did you expect to marry a virgin? That she should be pure while you were not?"

"That would have been hypocritical of me to say that I could sin and that was OK but that she could not."

"So if I wasn't pure, you'd feel the same way about me?"

"I do my best not to be judgmental or to hold anyone to a standard higher than the one to which I hold myself. I don't always achieve that ideal, but it is what I strive for. It wouldn't change anything about how I feel for you, nor would it change my desire to marry you."

"And you don't think it should change my desire?"

"That's up to you," I replied warily. "If I've failed to meet your standards, then you have to decide how to move forward, if at all."

"What do you want?"

"The same thing I've always wanted," I replied. "A faithful Orthodox wife with whom I can raise faithful kids, and who will be a partner in my callings, both spiritual and secular, and help me be a better man. I want that person to be you."

"And if you discover other girls were better? Then what?"

"There is no comparison I can possibly imagine to making love to my wife."

"I don't believe that. My friends say it can be good or bad."

"Do you think it's purely about how it feels physically, or do you think it's more than that?"

"How would I know?" she protested. "I haven't done it!"

"What do you think? That it's just a matter of having fun? Or is there more to it?"

"I think there is more to it, but I wonder if you really do. If you were with many girls, how can it ever be special for you?"

She had a VERY good point, and I didn't have a good answer; in fact, I had NO answer when it came right down to it. Or did I? There was ONE person with whom it was very different and very special -- Milena. That was true, even compared to my first time with Jocelyn in Cincinnati. And it had been the true emotional, spiritual, mental, and, yes, romantic connection I'd had with Milena that had made it better. And, to my surprise, as I thought about it, better than it had been with Clarissa, though I suspected that was because I had known in my heart of hearts that Clarissa and I could never marry.

"I think there's a difference between having sex with someone and truly making love with them," I replied carefully. "The physical part is actually the easy part, and I have no doubt that it will be good. The rest of it, though -- spiritual,

emotional, romantic, and mental -- makes it very, very different. Connecting each of those is FAR more important than connecting bodies."

"You didn't love any of those girls?"

"That's a complicated question, but I never loved anyone as my wife, and I never will, except for the woman who becomes my wife. And that's the important point and why we're doing all the things we're doing to prepare for the kind of closeness necessary for a successful marriage. I promise I will love you the way a husband should love his wife."

"If that's true, I wonder what promises you made to those girls to make them want to do that with you."

"Would you believe me if I told you none of them required any promises?"

"No."

"Even if that's the absolute truth? That I made no promises of the kind you're suggesting to any of them?"

"And if I were to ask Tasha, she'd agree that was true?"

"I'd really prefer not to name names, but do you think if I was with Tasha in that way, and I lied to her or broke my word to her, that she would be friends with us in the way she is? And want to spend time with us?"

"I don't know, but I suppose not. But why would Nik accept such a thing?"

"I suppose the answer to that question will be found in your own heart when you decide what to do about what I've told you."

"I'm not happy."

"I understand."

"You should have told me before when you admitted that you were experienced."

"I was afraid it would upset you and that it would prevent us from moving forward. Both Father Nicholas and Doctor Mercer advised me to tell you. I elected not to follow their advice for my own selfish reasons."

"Because you wanted to marry me?"

"Yes."

"And that was selfish?"

"Yes, because I didn't view it from your perspective and didn't consider how it would look to you."

"How *does* it look to me?"

"That I deceived you and misrepresented myself, at least with regard to the degree of my indiscretions."

"Did you tell me in front of your mom so I wouldn't be able to become angry?"

"No. I told you there because I made the comment about being completely open and honest, and I had failed to do that. I'm sorry."

"You've said that, and I accept your apology and forgive you. But that doesn't resolve the situation."

"No, it doesn't."

"Will you tell me the complete truth about Liz? There is something missing."

This was one of the family secrets I'd thought of when I'd told my mom I was going to reveal everything, though I didn't have Liz's permission. I'd have to confess to her that I'd shared things with Elizaveta without permission, but given everything that had happened, I didn't see a way around it. I couldn't do anything that looked as if I wasn't being forthright with Elizaveta, or everything WOULD come crashing down around me.

"There is. Before she took up with Paul, she was raped by her boyfriend and his friends."

"No!" Elizaveta gasped.

"They're all in prison now," I replied. "And for a long time. That came out when everything that happened with Paul was revealed. And all of that happened before I graduated from High School, though I didn't find out until a few weeks after graduation."

"That's just terrible!"

"I know. And to be honest, everything that happened with Liz pretty much led the family directly to where we are right now."

"Your dad seems very, very upset. He barely said anything to me."

"But he did make the effort to say 'hello' and tell you that he'll be at our wedding. The fact that he came upstairs is a big improvement over the past, but I don't

think we're out of the woods, and it's unclear if we ever will be. If he can't overcome his guilt, then he and my mom are going to end up divorced."

"All because of what happened to Liz."

"Yes. And there's more to it than just the rape -- drug use, promiscuity, and an abortion."

"Oh my God!" Elizaveta gasped.

"That's what our family has been trying to deal with. And despite all of that, Liz has a job, is going to school, and, in a couple of weeks, will be marrying the man who loves her. I consider that a miracle, especially given how bad things were."

"And you stuck by her through the whole thing?"

"Yes. Only Emmy and I fully supported Liz every step of the way without condemning her or shunning her. There were all kinds of ugly accusations that flew around, both in the family and outside the family, which I'll share if you insist, but I'd prefer not to talk about, as they're all completely resolved."

"I may ask in the future."

"Which will be your right as my wife."

"And you still think I should be your wife after what you've told me about your behavior?"

"Should? I can't answer that. But I do want you to be. You are everything I want and need in a partner for the rest of my life."

"Is there anything else you are hiding from me? Or are you afraid I will discover?"

"No."

"And you can be faithful to me?"

"Yes."

"Consider yourself on probation," she said firmly.

"Thank you," I replied, letting out a sigh of relief.



November 17, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"What led you to change your mind?" Father Nicholas asked when we met privately before our pre-marital counseling session.

"The entire situation at home with my parents. There are things of which I'm aware which I can't share with you because they're between my parents and between them and their confessor. But in the end, I made the comment to my mom that I was going to share everything with Elizaveta and be completely honest and open with her about everything. And at that moment, I realized I needed to tell her that I'd basically misled her with the truth."

"Not all deception is borne from lies, Subdeacon."

"I know. And that's something I have to pay very close attention to in many areas, but especially when talking with my patients and their families. Hope is important, but false hope is worse than no hope."

"I can speak from a pastoral perspective and tell you that the most important thing is to ensure you choose your words carefully. How you convey something is as important as what you convey. And you have to consider how the other person is going to receive what you say. With you, for example, I can be blunt and direct, and I actually need to be; with others, I need to use a bit more finesse and subtlety. You're learning how to talk with the young woman who will be your wife, and that's probably the most important skill for future happiness -- the ability to tailor HOW you say something to her needs. No lies, no deception, but putting things in a way that conveys whatever you're trying to say in love."

"She put me on probation."

"Frankly, you're lucky not to have had a rolling pin upside the head," Father Nicholas said with a smile.

"You didn't hear her tone of voice. I got the figurative two-by-four to the forehead. She took me to task for quite a few things, including how I treated the other girls, even though she never said a word about it directly."

"She's an intelligent, mature young woman who has paid close attention to how her mother, grandmothers, and the other women in the church keep their men in line. And that includes me!"

"Let's just say that crossing Matushka Natalya would likely be fatal."

"I believe you will be in the exact same situation! And you did say that you agreed with Mr. Sokolov that God gives us wives to make us better men. Elizaveta is already working on you."

I nodded, "I know. And to be honest, she's been far more effective than anyone else. It's EASY for me to do what she wants."

"That's one of the secrets of a happy marriage. I'm not saying be submissive or allow her to dominate you, but loving our wives and caring for them is an exercise in humility, which is only comparable to loving our kids and caring for them. We have to put them first, before our own desires."

"Giving ourselves up for them, just as Christ gave himself up for the Church."

"And I believe you're discovering that marriage is going to be even more difficult than you imagined."

"I'm beginning to get that idea."

"Good," Father Nicholas said. "Now, before we bring Elizaveta in, I want to discuss with her what you and I talked about in confession."

"Accountability?"

"Yes. Given your past, you and I both know where the temptation will arise and what it will be. It won't be drugs or alcohol."

"I know," I replied. "And having used my weakness in that area as a very lame excuse in the past, I'm susceptible to doing so in the future."

"Exactly. As I said to you, that gave me a major pause, but I felt that you could and would overcome it. It was a matter of getting you into a position where you could be successful. Are you dealing with any temptation at this point?"

"Other than Elizaveta? No. And there is zero chance I'm going to act on any temptation."

"Zero?"

"Zero," I said firmly.

"Good. Let's bring in Elizaveta."

I got up and went out of the office to bring Elizaveta in so we could have our pre-marital counseling session.

"Mike explained your conversation," Father Nicholas said. "Recently, in confession, and he's given me permission to tell you this, we discussed accountability strategies..."

"He knows who he's accountable to, Father," Elizaveta interrupted. "And he knows that any error in that regard will result in his «яйца» (*yaytsa*) being removed." ("balls [Lit. 'eggs']")

I managed to not laugh, but Father Nicholas apparently could not help himself. He managed to stop quickly and cleared his throat.

"The point is, to ensure that is never necessary," Father Nicholas said, fighting more laughter.

"Which is why I made it clear what will happen," she said sweetly.

"What I was going to say," he continued, "was that with the stress of Mike's training, both in school and as a Resident, there will be many temptations -- alcohol, drugs, and sex. I've suggested that in addition to confession, he develop a good male friend to whom he can talk and who can hold him accountable."

"I can do that," Elizaveta declared firmly.

"Yes, of course, but it's also the case Mike will need a good male friend, probably someone training to be a doctor, who is facing the same challenges. Between you, confession, and a male friend, he'll get through the trying times ahead."

"I think she's explaining what life will be like being married to a Russian woman," I chuckled.

"Oh, I got that picture quite clearly," Father Nicholas replied with a grin. "But I don't think either of you are THAT culturally Russian. You put on a good show for your friends, but in the end, you're American. Elizaveta's father is completely American as well."

"Russian blood, Father," I said, "and add to that a bit of chrism, and we may as well be sitting in a wooden church in the Ural Mountains!"

Father Nicholas laughed, "Maybe if you were at Holy Transfiguration and, please excuse the slight indiscretion, marrying Tasha, THEN it might be the case. But other than names and blood, how Russian is this parish?"

"Only a few traditions," I replied. "In fact, Elizaveta's grandfathers both call me 'Mike' and I know the bishop will likely ordain me as 'Deacon Michael', if my ordination to the subdiaconate is any indication."

"Whatever name passes his lips is what it will be, so you could be 'Deacon Barsanuphius', if the bishop was so inclined!"

"Fifty years in seclusion?" I asked, stroking my beard. "Barsanuphius of Gaza may have been on to something!"

Elizaveta smacked my shoulder hard, but she was also laughing.

"In all seriousness, has something like that happened?" I asked.

"Only once I'm aware of it," Father Nicholas replied. "The bishop, for whatever reason, chose to change the name of a young man who graduated from seminary without first consulting him."

"And the bishop's name? He says he was named Timofei?"

"And he was Father Timofei, as well. When he was elevated, he took the name 'ARKADY' in honor of Saint Arkady, a wonderworker and 'Fool for Christ', who helped found the Saints Boris and Gleb Monastery."

"I never heard that story," I said.

"Father," Elizaveta asked, "why would he change his name?"

"It had to do with his tonsuring as a monk," Father Nicholas replied. "An unmarried priest is not automatically a monk, but in our Archdiocese, all bishops are elected from the ranks of monastics. And a new name is common in such instances to signify a clear break from one's pre-monastic life. Usually, an abbot selects the name for the novice. And there are other times when new names are given, at least for ecclesiastical use. I'm sure you know that when non-Orthodox are brought into the Church, they select a patron saint, and that name is used in baptism, chrismation, confession, and at the Eucharist. In our jurisdiction, that's usually the end of it, though in ROCOR, converts often adopt their patron's name as the name they use in public as well."

"You know," I said, "I never thought to ask, but is your given name Elizabeth or Elizaveta?"

"It's the Russian style -- Elizaveta Viktorovna," she replied. "Yours is Michael Peter, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure if you would want to do this," Father Nicholas said, "but when you go to court to get the writ which will allow you to marry, you could change your name to Elizabeth Victoria or something similar."

"Why would I do that?" she asked.

"I wasn't suggesting it; I was just pointing out it was possible. Have you thought about naming your children?"

"Well, the boys would have either my dad's name or Mike's dad's name for their first name and Michael as their middle name, which is traditional, and I think Mike's grandfather would prefer that. As for girls, we haven't talked about names, but their middle name would be Michelle. I prefer that than simply picking what amounts to random middle names."

"What she said," I grinned.

Father Nicholas laughed and nodded, "I'm not surprised that you two would follow that particular tradition. Do you plan to teach your children Russian?"

"No, we don't," I said. "At least from my perspective, I don't think it's all that important. Elizaveta's family doesn't really use Russian in any serious way, and only my mom and her parents do. You know my abilities or lack thereof. Elizaveta speaks it a bit better than I do, but not much."

"I agree," Elizaveta said. "About the only Russian we use is when Mike calls me 'Kitten' in Russian. I like that."

"Are there any areas where you disagree?" Father Nicholas asked.

"When that happens, Mike is very quick to realize that I'm right and apologize," Elizaveta said mirthfully.

"I learn pretty quickly," I grinned. "But no, we're basically in agreement on all the important things. And, to be honest, there will be things where I'll simply let Elizaveta decide, such as decorating the house and so on. So long as I have a quiet place to study and keep my books and albums, I'll be happy with whatever she decides."

"I suppose the last question is finances."

"With not having to pay rent or utilities and having our own kitchen, I have enough saved to easily get us through medical school," I replied. "I've applied for grants and scholarships to reduce how much I'll have to borrow for tuition, and no payments are due on the loans until after I graduate. According to Mr. Kozlov, interest rates are going to continue to go down. They're already half of what they were just four years ago. So my fears of huge debt when I graduate have been somewhat allayed."

"And if you were to have children before then?" Father Nicholas inquired. "I mean after Elizaveta graduates?"

"My grandfather provided a gift which is sufficient to start a family," I replied. "I believe that was his way of telling me he wanted me to be ordained as soon as possible and provide him with great-grandchildren while he can enjoy them!"

"Did he attach those strings?"

I shook my head, "No, but once he told me the purpose of the gift, I understood his goals. But it's the same thing I told you about being ordained -- if I didn't feel called to the diaconate, his opinion wouldn't sway me."

"I have some money as well," Elizaveta said. "My grandparents have bought each of the grandchildren US Savings Bonds every year for our birthdays. I haven't touched mine at all, nor has Gennady. I think Joe spent his on partying."

"Have you heard from him recently?" Father Nicholas asked.

"No. He chose not to come home over the Summer, so the last time I saw him was Christmas. He's supposed to be home this Christmas as well."

"Speaking of holidays, where are you having Thanksgiving, Mike?"

"With Elizaveta's family. We discussed how to handle things in the future, and we'll very likely do our own holiday celebrations, then visit both families at some point around the holiday. It seems to have worked well for my grandparents where we have the larger family gathering late on the afternoon of Christmas."

"So long as the two of you are in agreement, that's sufficient. Both families will have to acknowledge that you have your own family unit."

"I don't see any problems in that regard, at least so far," I replied.

"Or me," Elizaveta said. "Though I'm sure my mom and grandmothers have a different opinion! They may voice their opinions, but I am in charge of my family, not them!"

"Why do I feel as if I should stand at attention and salute?" I asked, laughing and looking up at the ceiling.

"Get used to it," Father Nicholas said with a sly grin. "You chose to marry an ethnically Russian woman!"

"God only knows why!" I grinned.

Elizaveta shrieked in mock outrage but then laughed and kissed my cheek.

"On that note," Father Nicholas said, "I think we're done. We'll have another session in the Spring, unless there are concerns which you think need my attention before then."

Elizaveta and I agreed, received Father's blessing, and then left his office to take a walk in the chilly Autumn air before I had to join Father Nicholas in the altar.

"Will you answer a question honestly?" Elizaveta asked, slipping her hand into mine.

"Of course."

"Do you still think about other girls that way?"

"No. It's true that I notice pretty girls, but that's all."

"Why do you notice them?"

"It's difficult not to," I replied. "But remember, the sin comes from lusting for them, not for noticing their beauty. But, and I mean this, none compare to you."

"Not even Tasha?" she asked.

"Not even Tasha. You are the only woman I want, and you are the most beautiful woman in the world to me. And I really, truly mean that."

"But you haven't seen me yet!" she whispered.

"That particular gift will have to wait until AFTER the wedding, young lady!"

"How can you be so patient?" she asked, sounding exasperated. "I've never done it, and I can't wait!"

"You CAN wait because we promised to," I replied gently. "Not to mention the whole 'going to prison' problem."

"But I want you to BE my husband, and I want to BE your wife!" she whispered fiercely.

"And I want the same thing," I replied. "Very much. But we have to wait."

"You're being mean!" she teased.

"And so you'll refuse to kiss me?" I teased back. "How long will THAT last?"

"Arrrrgggghhhh!" she growled. "Men!"

I laughed at the slight rebalancing of power in my direction and squeezed Elizaveta's hand. We continued our walk for a few minutes before returning to the church for Vespers. After Vespers, Elizaveta went home with her parents, and I spent some time talking to Mark and Alyssa.



November 19, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday, I literally had nothing to do -- no work, no school, and all my friends had gone home. And on top of that, Elizaveta only had Thursday and Friday off from school. I slept a bit later than usual, then went out to run. It was a bit chillier than I would have liked, but the Taft gym was closed, so I had to run outside.

When I got back, I decided to warm up by soaking in a hot bath. I double-checked that the door to my room was locked, then went to the bathroom, turned on the taps, and got into the tub. When the tub was full, I shut off the water, then simply leaned back to relax. As I soaked, I decided my house, when I eventually had one, had to have a whirlpool tub and a sauna. I'd come to enjoy the sauna at Katy's house, and I certainly enjoyed the large tub at Doctor Blahnik's house.

When the water cooled, I got out, drained the tub, took a shower, then went downstairs to make breakfast. We were in the Nativity Fast, which had started the previous Thursday, and normally, that would have severely limited my options, but with the new rule Father had given Elizaveta and me, I could have dairy and eggs.

I wasn't thrilled with the new fasting rules, but Father had rightly pointed out that discipline and obedience were part of the point, and it was up to him and the bishop to determine what was spiritually best for Elizaveta and me individually and as a couple. That meant I could have waffles, scrambled eggs, and buttered toast, but of course meant no bacon, which was something I truly missed during fasting periods.

"Morning, Mike!" Doctor Blahnik said, coming into the kitchen. "How was your bath?"

"Very nice," I replied. "Though I felt it was a bit early for a glass of wine!"

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "That's only true if you've just gotten up from bed! If you haven't been to bed yet, it's not!"

I chuckled, "Why do I get the idea that you had a VERY interesting youth?"

"Did you just say I'm old?!" she demanded.

"Uh, no, uhm, of course not! But you aren't a teenager or even a college student!"

"Which nature has a way of reminding me on a fairly regular basis! Things I could do at twenty aren't quite so easy at fifty!"

"Really?" I asked with an arched eyebrow. "Derek seems very happy!"

Doctor Blahnik laughed and shook her head, "And this from the student who blushed when he sang a love song with Milena just three years ago!"

"Things have changed a bit since then," I replied.

"Very true! Are your plans still the same? Thanksgiving at Elizaveta's house?"

"Yes."

"OK. Why not bring her here for dinner on Friday? Milena and Joel will still be here, as will Derek."

"I'm sure she'll like that."

"Good. We'll start with tea around 3:00pm if that works. Do you have any plans for the next few days? I know the High School still has classes."

"No plans other than to relax. That's something I don't get to do very often. And 3:00pm is fine."

"Then just make yourself at home. I'll be in and out."

"Thanks. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Yes, I would!"

I made breakfast for the two of us, we ate, then cleaned up the kitchen and I went to the great room to continue reading *The Hunt for RED OCTOBER*.



November 20, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Do you want to see?" Elizaveta asked with a smirk on Tuesday afternoon.

"It's not a permit to learn to do THAT!" I replied with a smirk of my own.

"You're just no fun!" she teased.

"You put me on probation! I have to behave. But yes, show me!"

Elizaveta pulled her Learner's Permit from her purse and showed me.

"Congratulations."

"I think Dad is very happy you're teaching me to drive! He's not thrilled with Mom's driving!"

"It's funny because Tasha always gave me the keys to her Volvo if we were taking it. I don't recall ever riding with her. Jocelyn had her own car, though after the accident, she couldn't drive for quite some time. And I've never ridden with my sister, and I'm not sure I'd want to!"

"Why?"

"The same reason I don't like riding with Jocelyn -- they both have lead feet."

"You have a muscle car!" Elizaveta protested.

"Yes, I do. And it drives quite nicely at the speed limit!"

"You're not going to let me drive it fast?"

"Don't you think you should learn to drive FIRST, then worry about driving fast?"

"Maybe," she said with a silly smile.

"Just get into the driver's seat, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)!" ("Kitten")

She laughed and got in, and I walked around to the other side of my Mustang and got into the passenger seat.

"First, make sure the seat is adjusted so you can reach the pedals properly."

"Maybe move it forward a bit?" she suggested after testing the pedals.

"Then reach down and pull the release and shift forward just a bit."

She did so and then nodded.

"OK. Now, the mirrors. Adjust the rear-view mirror so you can see properly out the back window."

She did that.

"And now roll down the window and adjust the side mirror so that you can just see the side of the car in the right-hand part of the mirror."

"Got it," she said as she did that. "But the other one?"

"The biggest pain in the butt ever if you're alone. I'll adjust, and you tell me."

We got the mirror adjusted and rolled up the windows.

"OK. Now, the most important thing is to be smooth and accurate," I said. "On the floor are three pedals. The one on the right is the accelerator, or gas; the middle one, which is widest, is the brake; the one on the left is the clutch. You always use your right foot for the gas and brake and your left foot for the clutch. You use your right hand to hold the stick."

"Like this, husband?" she asked with a smirk.

I slapped her hand lightly when she moved it PAST the shifter, with a very different 'stick' being her playfully intended destination.

"The stick shift!" I corrected. "The other one is for *after* we marry!"

She stuck her tongue out at me but moved her hand to the stick shift.

"Don't start the car just yet," I continued. "The basic idea is to press the clutch in smoothly and release it smoothly while you move the gear shift quickly up or down, depending on the gear you're in. Don't slam it around, but you do need to be firm enough to ensure it moves fully into place. Let's practice a bit while the car is sitting still and the motor isn't running. Press in the clutch with your left foot and keep it pressed down. Then move the gear selector through the gears, 1st through 4th, then back down to 1st."

Elizaveta did so a few times, and once I felt she could handle the basic motions, I had her put the shifter in neutral and start the engine.

"The trickiest part of learning to drive a manual transmission is starting from a full stop, especially if it's on a hill. The driveway starts out flat, so you won't have any trouble with the car rolling back. Just put your right foot on the brake, keep the clutch pushed in, and put the car into 1st gear."

Elizaveta followed the instructions, then said, "OK."

"Good. Now, move your right foot from the brake to the gas, then slowly and smoothly let out the clutch while you gently press the gas pedal, but don't give it a lot of gas. If the car stalls, step on the brake, push in the clutch, start the engine, and try again."

Elizaveta once again followed the instructions I'd given her, and after one false start where she stalled the car, she pulled forward, slowly moving down the driveway.

"Excellent. Just keep it in first gear and drive to the end of the driveway, where you should stop to look for traffic or kids on bikes or whatever. When you stop, you need to push in both the clutch and brake or else you'll stall the engine."

She drove to the end of the driveway and stopped.

"Good. Now, use the little stalk on the steering column to turn on the turn signal. Push it up to signal a right turn. We're just going to go to the High School and practice in the parking lot. It's close, and we can get there on residential streets, so you won't have to worry about anything other than stop signs and watching for kids. Just do the same thing you did to start and turn the wheel right."

She did as I instructed, once again stalling the car on the first attempt, but on the second, she managed to pull out of the driveway and onto the street.

"Good. Be sure to slow down before you come too close to the stop sign. It'll take some practice, but you'll figure it out. At the end of the driveway, you pushed the brake pedal a bit too hard, which is why we stopped abruptly. Just remember, slow, smooth, and accurate."

We came to the stop sign, and she did a better job.

"Do you know how to get to the school from here?" I asked.

"Duh! I take the bus every day!"

"Which doesn't mean you pay attention to the streets or where to turn!"

She managed to pull away from the stop sign without stalling and continued straight.

"How do I know when to shift?" she asked.

"It'll become second nature in the end, and you'll know by feel and by the engine sounds, but for now, just watch the tachometer. The faster you go in any given gear, the higher the RPMs. You want to keep them at around 3000. When they're above 3000, think about shifting, which you should do now. Just push in the clutch, move the shifter quickly but smoothly down into 2nd gear, then smoothly let out the clutch."

I cringed as the gears clattered.

"Push the clutch all the way to the floor, then move the shifter," I said gently.

She got it the second time, and despite a lurch, there were no grinding sounds.

"When we come to the next stop, remember, just push in the clutch and then brake. You can move the gear selector to neutral until you stop, then put it in 1st to get going. Once you learn, you'll be able to use the gearbox to slow down instead of the brakes, which I'm sure you've seen me do. I'll teach you that later."

She did a decent job of stopping at the next stop sign but stopped about six feet short. I didn't say anything, as I knew she'd learn to judge distances as she practiced. She put on the turn signal, turned right, and we continued towards the school. Once we got there, I had her use the long road back to the football field to practice getting up to third gear. After a few times back and forth, she was fairly smooth, so we went to the largest open spot in the parking lot so I could teach her to back up. It took her several tries to get her head, hands, and feet all working together, but eventually, she could back up in a straight line. Once that was done, we drove around the school several times so she could work on shifting, turning, and stopping.

"How do you think I did?" she asked when I directed her to drive home.

"Just fine for a beginner," I replied. "Like most things, it just takes practice."

"LOTS of practice!" she teased.

"When it's time, yes. For now, we'll have you practice driving on Saturday after lunch, OK?"

"Sure! Dad suggested I wait to get my license until after the wedding so I don't have to have any hassles in changing my name."

"Your passport will have your maiden name because there won't be time to replace it before we go to Europe, but that won't be a problem. We'll take along a copy of our marriage certificate, obviously, and that will have your maiden name

on it as well. Now, pay attention to the road and get us safely back to your house!"

Elizaveta did a good job driving home and only stalled the car once at a stop sign. When we got to the house, I dropped her off, and then her dad and I went to the country club for dinner.

XXXIV. A Close Call

November 23, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Can we spend some time kissing?" Elizaveta asked when I picked her up on Friday afternoon.

"So long as you behave, yes!" I replied.

"Which is what the girls usually say to the boys!"

"Do your friends have trouble with that?"

"Sometimes. They say the guys try to push things further than the girls want to go."

"And Marjorie?" I grinned. "How is she doing!"

"It's not TOO cold yet!" Elizaveta replied with a soft laugh. "During Christmas break, my school friends want to meet you."

"That's fine," I replied. "Just let me know. I'll be staying at Doctor Blahnik's house."

"Did you see the newspaper this morning?"

"No, I don't usually read it. Melody keeps me posted on anything important. Why?"

"Those three boys who beat up Lee? They all go to Faith Bible Church. Reverend Saddler was questioned about it."

"Whoa!" I gasped. "That was in the paper?"

"Yes. Gennady showed it to me because it mentioned that the boys who were beaten up went to Taft."

"Did it say anything else?"

"No, just that the police were investigating. Do you think he told those guys to beat up your friends?"

"I have no clue, but obviously, the police think there's something going on. And sadly, it wouldn't surprise me because the Reverend was harassing Robby and Lee that first time I confronted him. And after the debate, I'm sure some people at his church were quite upset."

"Do you think those two Seniors who come to Vespers are in any danger?"

"I have no idea, but it is something I need to mention to Father Nicholas at Vespers tomorrow."

"Has he been back on campus? The Reverend, I mean."

"Not that any of my friends have seen. Melody predicted he won't come back, and I think she might be right. They'll need to send someone else or at least wait until I'm not around. Did your dad tell you that his dad asked me to help out with the new campus ministry?"

"He said he was going to ask you, but I was pretty sure you would be too busy."

"I'm going to serve on the committee and maybe do occasional talks, but I can't be too deeply involved."

"True. Mom said I should ask you if there's anything special I need to get for our trip to Europe. I think she's looking for ideas for Christmas and birthday presents!"

"Lara suggested we all get good, comfortable walking shoes with cushioned insoles, comfortable backpacks, and fanny packs so we can carry stuff with us during the day but keep our hands free, and so we don't have to carry the backpacks all the time, and cameras."

"Do you have a camera?" Elizaveta asked.

"No. My dad was the one who took all the photos. My grandfather likes to use his Super-8mm film camera. He looked at getting one of the new cameras that use cassettes like the VTRs we have at Taft, but they're still too expensive. He told me there's a new format coming out soon that will use 8mm tape instead of half-inch. I guess he'll get one sometime next year, but those are WAY too expensive for me to even think about and probably way too heavy to carry with us."

"I have a Pocket Instamatic -- you know, the kind that is like a rectangle, not a regular camera."

"That's probably best. It uses film cartridges, right? Not spools?"

"Yes. It uses '110' film in a little cartridge."

"That sounds perfect for our trip. We'll just need lots of film cartridges."

"Do you know what kind of clothes we'll need?"

"It'll be Summer, and most of the places we're going will be really warm, so shorts or blue jeans and T-shirts or polo shirts. A lightweight, rain-proof windbreaker with a hood is something Lara suggested as well. I talked to Mr. Malenkov about getting foreign currency, but we need something like ten currencies, so he said it makes more sense to take American Express Traveler's Cheques. We can exchange them for local currency in each country and exchange Dutch currency for French currency, for example."

"How do rooms work?"

"In Amsterdam, we'll have a room to share for the six of us with a private bathroom. In Paris, you and I have the special room at the hotel. After that, the travel agent found hostels with either double rooms or ones where we'll all share a room. They avoided ones where we'd have to sleep in sex-segregated dorms or there was no privacy at all. It works out that about half of the nights, it'll be just you and me in a room."

"I need to make sure I bring my birth control pills!"

"Absolutely! And make sure you bring the prescription, too, so there aren't any questions."

"I think I'll start a list based on the things we talked about. We can review it on Saturdays to make sure we have everything. I should probably talk with Sandy and Clarissa, too."

"That makes sense," I agreed.

"Uhm, can I ask something?"

"Remember what I said?"

"Yes, but this isn't about us. Are Clarissa and Abby going to sleep together with us in the room?"

"If you mean share a bed? Yes, that's possible. The room for six actually has three bunk beds, but I assumed you and I would sleep in the same bed. I'm not sure what Clarissa and Abby will do, or Pete and Sandy. Is it a problem?"

"It's just weird. I mean, it would be strange sleeping in the same room with Pete and Sandy, but Clarissa and Abby..."

"I've never even seen them kiss," I replied. "Whatever they do, they do in private. You and I are careful about how we act in public, too. Mostly, I've seen Clarissa and Abby hold hands or dance, which is pretty much what I've seen with Robby and Lee. Sandy and Pete don't really have an objection to public displays of affection, but they aren't gross about it."

"Some kids at school have serious make-out sessions by their lockers before classes! It's just gross to see. The teachers make them stop if they see them."

"Why don't you just ask Clarissa? She'll talk to you about it."

"I'm not sure I want to know."

"That's how I felt about Robby and Lee, but in the end, I'm going to be a doctor, and I'll have patients who are gay or lesbian, and I want to understand them just as I do heterosexual couples."

"Does anyone at church besides Father Nicholas know about your gay and lesbian friends?"

"Tasha does, and I know she spoke to Nik before he met Clarissa, but I think that's it. If you think about it, their sin isn't any worse than any other sin. And none of them have done anything disrespectful at church, nor would they ever."

"It's just that you know the attitudes."

"I do, but my mom never had those attitudes, which is why I never did. My grandfather wasn't like that either. Neither was Mr. Sokolov, by the way. Mr. Orlov fired me from the hardware store back home because of Clarissa, Robby, and Lee."

"Wow; I didn't know that!"

"Most people don't. It's complicated, but the end result was that Mr. Orlov complained about my friendship with them to the bishop. Clarissa and I went to talk to the bishop about it, and after careful consideration, he agreed that I was handling it in a properly Christian manner."

"So, like with your sister?"

"I suppose so, in terms of what I was doing. The problem actually arose when I told Tasha about Clarissa because I knew eventually she would find out. Tasha went to the Orlovs, who are her godparents, and I'm pretty sure Tasha mentioned Mrs. Orlova is the one who matched us."

"She did. When did all of this happen?"

"A little less than two years ago. It was when I was dating Janey Riley, and she and Tasha had a huge fight."

"Over you?"

"Yes. It was pretty messy, to the point where they had a screaming match in the hallway at Harding County High."

"What did you do to cause that?"

"Besides being an idiot?"

"Yes."

"French-kissed Janey in public, where Tasha saw, and when Tasha was unaware I was dating Janey."

"That's horrible!" she exclaimed in outrage. "You cheated on Tasha?!"

"No, I didn't cheat," I replied, keeping my voice soft. "Tasha and I weren't permitted to date, and she knew I was seeing other girls, just not which specific ones. After that incident, Tasha and I fixed things, which I think should be obvious, with the agreement that I wouldn't date anyone from either church. I broke things off with Janey just before that because we didn't have a shared vision of the future. You can ask Tasha about it, and she'll tell you I wasn't cheating. I was stupid, but I didn't cheat."

"You seem to have behaved very badly in the past."

"I have, and I'm not going to excuse my behavior."

"And how do I know you won't behave badly in the future?"

"Because I'll have you to help me," I replied, "just as Mr. Sokolov said. Not to sound like I'm placing blame elsewhere, but if Tasha's dad had allowed us to date and be boyfriend and girlfriend, much of the bad stuff I did probably wouldn't have happened."

"Because she would have kept you in line."

"As will you."

"Your past behavior worries me," she said quietly. "It's not what I would have expected."

"Have you changed your mind about us?"

"No," she said, sounding tentative. "You're everything I want in a husband. But your past concerns me."

"I'm sorry I've disappointed you," I said.

Elizaveta was quiet for the rest of the drive to Doctor Blahnik's house, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. I didn't even want to think about what would happen if she chose to break things off, but I couldn't stop the runaway thoughts which quickly overwhelmed me. It would be a nightmare of epic proportions and one from which I'd have serious difficulty recovering. And all because I had let my hormones control my behavior.

"What do you want to do?" I asked when I pulled up in front of Doctor Blahnik's house.

"I really wish you had told me all of this before, but if you had, then I probably wouldn't have wanted to marry you."

"I'm sorry," replied dejectedly. "I can take you home, if you want."

"I told you before I hadn't changed my mind. You're right that you've disappointed me, but you said all of it was before we began seeing each other. That is true, isn't it?"

"Yes. I finally got my act together, such as it is, around the time your dad invited me to dinner. Things actually started getting better around the first of the year, but it took some time to break my bad habits."

"You said it started after you graduated -- was it before or after you started at Taft?"

"I suppose it depends on how you look at it, but I'd say it's best to say it was after I started at Taft. Why?"

"I was trying to figure out how your thinking changed and if maybe it was going to college."

"I suppose you could say that I was exposed to lots of new ideas and lots of new people. When I was growing up, I had the same two friends from second grade onward. And Jocelyn and I actually became friends in kindergarten. I pretty much only hung out with them, and even when we all started dating, most of our dates were triple dates. Sure, I practiced karate and played chess, but even with those, Dale was on the chess team, and I didn't hang out with any of the other karate students.

"Then, after graduation, reality sort of exploded my worldview, and then I came to Taft and met people I would never have thought about having as friends. You could say that they changed me, but I'm still responsible for me. What changed was being exposed to new ideas and new ways of thinking. That was necessary from the standpoint of being a good doctor, but I let my thinking stray with regard to purity.

"To be clear, I wasn't pure when I came to Taft, but I had only been with one person. Probably the best way to put it is that I let my guard down, blamed my weakness, and let it control my life. I struggled with that for three years and, at times, had limited success, but nearly always succumbed. I knew that I had to conquer it once and for all if I was even going to come to dinner at your house."

"You did it for me?" Elizaveta asked.

"I think it's safer to say I did it for me because I knew that to have a relationship with you, I had to subdue the sinful nature I'd been feeding. Once I starved it, it became easier to control, which allowed me to starve it further, to the point where it is no longer my master."

"I'm sorry for trying to tempt you in that regard."

"You're the one person on the planet who ought to tempt me in that regard! For us, it's a matter of timing, well, assuming you still want to marry me."

"I do still want to marry you, Mike. Even if I'm not happy about the past, we're talking and working through the areas of concern. And you're not trying to hide your bad behavior, nor are you making excuses for it. If I felt you weren't being honest now, I would change my mind. But I'm sure that if we get through this crisis, we'll be a stronger couple."

"You are an amazing young woman," I said.

"Just remember that, husband!"

"I will."



November 24, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"How was your break, Petrovich?" Clarissa asked as I unlocked the door to my room.

She'd arrived back at Taft while I'd been at Vesper's and was waiting for me.

"I managed to not break up with Elizaveta," I replied.

"What the heck happened?"

I put on *Francesco Zappa*, an album of chamber music recorded and published by Frank Zappa.

"What's this?" Clarissa asked.

"Frank Zappa," I grinned. "According to the liner notes, Zappa heard it from a friend of his, and when he discovered it wasn't published, he found the music in the Mormon archives and recorded this album. I could put on *Like A Virgin* by Madonna if you prefer."

"I don't think there are any virgins on this floor!" Clarissa smirked. "And you're responsible for several of the girls not being virgins, including me, at least in one sense!"

"Which," I sighed, "is what got me into trouble with Elizaveta."

"I thought you weren't going to tell her?"

"It's a long story," I replied. "But the short version is I told my mom, in Elizaveta's presence, that I wasn't going to keep any secrets from Elizaveta."

"What was the context?"

"Liz, of course. In the end, my dad actually said 'hello' to Elizaveta, but I'm concerned my mom is going to go to Liz's wedding, and that will send my dad over the edge of the cliff."

"So you told Elizaveta about your history?"

"No names and no real specifics; just that I had a number of lovers in the past."

"I take it she took you to task for that?"

"And then some," I replied. "There were a few difficult conversations, but we worked through things, and she has me on probation."

"I'd say it's a damned good thing you chose to agree to Lara's terms."

"I know, and I'll thank her for that when I see her."

"So things are a little better with your dad?"

"I'm not sure I'd say that," I replied. "I reminded him of a promise he made to love any girl I married and treat her as a daughter. That got him to at least speak to Elizaveta, but the real problem lies with his opinion of Liz. And unfortunately, my attempts to fix things between my mom and Liz may have sown seeds of destruction."

"I'm not sure what else you could have done," Clarissa soothed. "Honestly, I think your dad is acting like a jackass."

"Maybe so," I replied. "But I effectively did the same thing he's doing -- forcing Mom to make a choice."

"Not to sound like I'm six years old, but he started it!" Clarissa declared firmly. "He's the one who forced the choice. All you've been doing, from the start, is trying to repair the rift between you and your parents and between your parents and Liz. What were your alternatives? Cut Liz off completely? Have your parents boycott your wedding and wreck your ordination?"

"My ordination can't be more important than my parents' marriage," I replied.

"Let's assume you gave up on that; then what happens? Refuse to be involved in Liz's life? Pretend nothing happened and forget she's a member of the family? I can't see you doing that. Why would you?"

"They'd be together."

"Bullshit! You know full well that your mom doesn't agree with your dad. And I know your mom well enough to know at some point, things would come to a head and reach the breaking point. Your priest and their priest acknowledged you were doing the right thing. You can't blame yourself for anything that happened! This result was pretty much guaranteed when Liz took up with Paul four years ago."

"Not if I hadn't turned him in."

"From your perspective, you feel you had a fit of pique and improperly claimed the moral high ground because he was married, which resulted in you turning him in to the police. But other than you, Paul, and Liz, everyone thinks you did the right thing when you did that. And I will point out that those assholes who actually raped your sister are in prison because of the sequence of events.

"I think Liz's relationship with Paul, and your initial reaction to it, is gnawing at you now because of Elizaveta. But there is a huge difference between ten years at fourteen and less than six at fifteen or sixteen when you actually marry. In your

mind, you've drawn some sort of equivalence between the situations, and there is none! First, sixteen is legal; fourteen is not. You aren't married; Paul was. You don't have a kid; Paul did. Your relationship is in the open; his with Liz was hidden.

"When your dad drew the picture that made you and Paul equivalent in his mind and expressed that to you, you fell into what amounts to a trap -- if you don't support Paul, you're a hypocrite; if you do support Paul, you're just like him. Well, you aren't, and you need to get your dad out of your head! If you don't, you're really going to make a mess of things.

"Think about just how different things are -- you and Elizaveta went to see Doctor Mercer for pre-marital counseling. And you chose to do that knowing Doctor Mercer didn't agree with your intentions. You took the bull by the horns and dealt with it publicly and openly. And what happened? Doctor Mercer discovered that your «Котёнок» (*katyonak*) is a mature, intelligent, completely together young woman. And it seems she's proved that by the way she's handled the revelation that you're something of a Casanova or Don Juan! ("Kitten")

"The bottom line is that you shouldn't feel guilty for anything you've done. With regard to your family, you did the right thing, even if the results were bad. With regard to your playing around, you confessed and received absolution. I'm not trying to say that you are sinless, just that according to what you claim to believe, once you've acknowledged your sins, confessed them, and made amends as appropriate, then you aren't supposed to have any further care for those sins. Right?"

"Yes," I replied with a wry smile. "Could I interest you in a bit of chrism?"

"Which would mean agreeing with you that being with Abby is a sin."

"Yes, though you know our definition of sin is 'missing the mark', not some permanent break between you and God."

"And would I be able, in good conscience, and with the blessing of the priest and bishop, to partake of the Eucharist while I was living together with Abby as my partner?"

"Probably not. But you know I don't think you're going to Hell because of that."

"No, you don't. But you know I can't become Orthodox."

"I do," I agreed. "But my comment was an acknowledgment that you understand what I've been teaching you."

"Pardon my use of this stupid cliché, but 'Physician, heal thyself'."

"Which, by the way, Luke reports Jesus as quoting in chapter 4, verse 23 of Luke's Gospel."

"How DO you do that? Just pull that off the top of your head like that?"

"Nearly twenty-two years of being Orthodox. You're at church often enough that some of it is rubbing off on you! Think about those of us who've done that from the time we were babies."

"And do you agree with my assessment?"

"Just because I know the theology doesn't mean I'm all that good at applying it to my own life."

"You know my take on that whole 'chief of sinners' bit, right?"

"I know you STILL don't understand it," I replied with a soft smile. "You still think it's about me being more or less sinful than other people. It's not. It's about pride and thinking I'm better than anyone else. It's about not being a hypocrite. Or, as the Scriptures say -- remove the log from your own eye so you can see clearly to remove the splinter from your neighbor's eye."

"I suppose I do take that too literally, but there are times when you do think of yourself in the way I described."

"Only with regard to sex," I chuckled. "And I finally conquered that demon."

Clarissa smirked, "Your poor «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)! All that pent-up desire you have!" ("Kitten")

I chuckled, "I think you might be surprised at who has more pent-up desire."

"Horny virginal teenager or focused medical student?"

"My libido is not what it appears to be, my behavior notwithstanding."

"You were looking for something," Clarissa said quietly. "And you only ever found it with Milena."

"And you."

"Not the same way," Clarissa said. "For you and Milena, it wasn't about sex; it was about a deeper intimacy. Sex was the thing you did before you had your deep, meaningful talks. It was never the focus. With me, it was an impediment; with her, it was a catalyst. Nobody else was even close, not even Jocelyn. And once you and Elizaveta get past the 'new toy' phase, that's what it will be like for the two of you."

"You're sure of that?"

"What did you tell me about how she handled the situation this week? Who, of all the girls you've explored a relationship with, could do that?"

"You," I replied with a smile, "but as you said, sex was an impediment. Maybe Lara, but we didn't get that far because she couldn't live under the microscope and wear the straitjacket of being Matushka Larisa."

"So you agree that once you and your «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*) fuck each other senseless for a couple of weeks or months, it'll become more like you and Milena?" ("Kitten")

"I'd say there's a decent chance of that, though Elizaveta IS a horny teenager!"

"Can anyone join this party?" Robby asked from the door to my room.

"Sure," I replied. "Come on in."

Robby, Lee, and Sophia came into the room and sat down on the couch in their usual configuration -- Robby sitting between Sophia and Lee.

"How's the wrist?" Clarissa asked.

"It's OK. Aspirin keeps the throbbing under control, but I do miss the Percocet!"

All of us laughed, and Robby patted Lee's leg in comfort.

"Did you guys hear about the investigation?" I asked.

"Did something happen?" Robby asked.

"Those three idiots all go to Reverend Saddler's church."

"Holy shit!" Sophia gasped. "Do you think it was retaliation because you intervened when he was haranguing Robby and Lee?"

"I don't want to jump to conclusions," I replied. "But I'd say the police think there might be some kind of connection."

"Did they talk to you?"

"No. There was a blurb in the paper. I didn't see it, but Elizaveta told me about it. Just that the police were investigating a link."

"Did those other two kids show up at church again?" Sophia asked.

"Three Saturdays in a row now. But I don't think that's public knowledge. They're dating and simply come to church before they go on their regular date."

"What about the guy who talked to Father Nicholas?" Clarissa asked.

"He hasn't been to church," I replied. "But he has met Father Nicholas for lunch twice."

"And Saddler hasn't been back on campus?" Lee asked.

"I haven't seen him," I replied. "But with no classes last week and everyone gone, that doesn't surprise me. If he doesn't show up next Saturday, then I'd say we won't see him again, at least for the rest of the school year."

"What are you guys going to do for your campus ministry?" Robby asked.

"Our first meeting to discuss it is on December 4. Part of the problem is that the last pan-Orthodox campus ministry, the Campus Commission, fell apart in the early 70s, and nobody has been able to resurrect it. Mostly, churches near universities do their own thing, if they do anything at all. That means we're basically starting from scratch. Prison ministry is the same -- it's done by individual parishes. We'll figure out, between now and next Fall, what we'll do. How was your Thanksgiving?"

"Good. We each had Thanksgiving with our parents, then on Friday we got together with a bunch of High School friends. Everyone brought leftovers, and we had a second Thanksgiving."

"That's a cool idea!" Clarissa exclaimed.

"We started it in High School," Robby replied. "One of our friends had the idea. We all thought it was awesome, so we're continuing as long as we can. Once everyone graduates and starts their own families, it'll be tough for all of us to get together. How about you? Aren't you in one of your fasting periods?"

"The Nativity Fast, but we have «ekonomia» for Thanksgiving. It's one of those quirks related to the change in calendars. If we were on the 'Old Calendar', Thanksgiving would be before the Nativity Fast. Or, if we were an Orthodox country, the harvest festival would have been set outside a fasting period. Canada does theirs in October. Our bishops agree that fasting on Thanksgiving would be counter-productive and a bad witness."

"How long does it last?" he asked.

"The Nativity Fast lasts from November 15th until after the Divine Liturgy on Christmas morning."

"Did you go home?"

I shook my head, "No. I stayed at Doctor Blahnik's house, which you knew I was going to do, and I spent Thanksgiving Day with Elizaveta's family."

"Still no thaw in the 'Cold War'?" Sophia asked.

"Not really."

"Your sister gets married in about two weeks, right?"

I nodded, "And that's when all hell is likely to break loose."



December 11, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

As Clarissa, Jocelyn, and I got into my Mustang early on Tuesday afternoon, I realized just how quickly time had passed. The two weeks since Thanksgiving had been a whirlwind of classes, studying, church, time with Elizaveta and her family, and time with my friends. The semester was winding down quickly, and final exams would begin six days hence. I'd spend most of Christmas break with Elizaveta, but we planned to get together with Dale and Jocelyn in West Monroe, as well as spend some time with Paul and Liz, who were going to be married in a few hours.

I was suffering from quite a bit of trepidation, as I hadn't talked to my mom since before Thanksgiving. If she showed up at the County Courthouse alone, I felt that would mean the end of my parents' marriage. If she didn't come, that would be a rejection of Liz, which I knew Liz could not abide, and which would end any hope of reconciliation between them. The chances that my dad would show up were vanishingly small, and I basically discounted that possibility.

The other two possibilities were almost equally grim, as both would put an end to any semblance of our family. The end result would be either Mom, Liz, and me against my dad, or Mom and Dad on one side and Liz and me on the other. If they shunned her, they were, in effect, shunning me. While my dad might grudgingly accept Elizaveta as his daughter, every holiday and every event would have the risk of some kind of blowup between my dad and Paul or my dad and Liz.

"You're out of sorts, Petrovich," Clarissa said as I drove out of town towards Elizaveta's house.

"You know why," I replied.

"Not to be mean or heartless," Jocelyn said, "but which outcome is worse?"

"You mean choosing between losing one parent or losing both?" I asked. "I can't judge that way because the very idea that my parents might divorce is so beyond anything I would have considered even a year ago, I'm not sure how to evaluate what the worst outcome might be. Unless there's a miracle, my kids are going to never have a relationship with at least one grandparent, if not two."

"As your friend from kindergarten, I have to say, despite all the teasing between you and your sister, I could never imagine you abandoning Liz under any circumstances. Only you and Emmy stood by her the entire way, with no accusations and no recriminations. You both loved her, and nothing else mattered. I just don't see how that could possibly be wrong."

"That's not what's bugging him," Clarissa said. "He STILL can't get past the fact that he feels he ceded the moral high ground to his dad by fucking us and other girls."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Mike!" Jocelyn groused. "Your dad had sex with your mom before they got married. Period. End of guilt trip! That's how I finally settled things with my parents over Thanksgiving. I was at their wedding, for heaven's sake! Their little moral crusade was pure hypocrisy, and they knew it. And guess what? So does your dad! In fact, I bet that's the REAL problem. He feels guilty because not only did he have sex before he married, but also that he thinks he married a slut!"

"Jos!" I spat.

"I didn't say she was, Mik; I said HE thinks that; well, I implied that if I didn't say those exact words. Your dad is projecting his own self-loathing onto Liz but also onto you and your mom. Until he gets over it, there is nothing you or anyone else can do to fix this."

"Do you think he's punishing himself?" Clarissa asked.

"Maybe so," Jocelyn replied. "Mike, doesn't that fit with his effectively Calvinist beliefs?"

"It would," I sighed. "If he thinks he, and all of us, including himself, are destined for Hell, he'd blame himself, which is contradictory to the whole 'predestination' thing. If you think about it, if the Calvinist version of predestination is true, and the idea of 'foreknowledge of Free-Will acts' is excluded, which Five Point Calvinists do, then every single act was determined before the foundation of the world and we not only have no responsibility, but we can claim that we are doing exactly what God wills us to do, and as such, our will is conformed to His, and we are perfectly obedient, and thus everyone is saved!"

"So it's all a puppet show, in effect?" Clarissa asked.

"Logically, it would be unless man has Free Will and actively participates in salvation. You could also escape by saying that God's perfect knowledge includes everything we'll do but doesn't cause it, but Calvinism rejects Free Will completely. Jocelyn fudges it a bit by saying human will is in bondage to sin but that baptism and the hearing of the Gospel work to create true faith in the believer's heart. Lutherans don't deny we are capable of good works; they just deny those works have any efficacy with regard to salvation.

"In my view, the major source of the problem between us and the Lutherans, and Protestants in general, stems from a base contradiction with regard to how sin entered the world. If I ask Jocelyn, she'll say that Adam and Eve were created perfect and good and sinless in the Garden of Eden, at least insofar as the story reflects spiritual truth, not a literal Garden and creation in six days. But then I have to ask, if they were perfect and good and sinless, how on God's green earth did they sin in the first place?"

"Oops," Clarissa replied with a snicker.

"Yeah," I grinned. "As Kristin would say, that doesn't compute!"

"You know, we never talked about this," Jocelyn said.

"I never saw the point in discussing theology with you," I replied. "And besides, I recall you saying 'Paris is worth a mass' at one point!"

"True! So what do you believe?"

"That Adam and Eve were created innocent, not perfect, and with Free Will, which allowed them the choice to follow God or follow Satan. Unlike the Calvinists, we assert that the Fall didn't obliterate the image and likeness of God in man, only sullied it. Remember, we inherit mortality -- which is a result of sin

-- from Adam and Eve; we do not inherit their guilt, which is what the West, following Augustine of Hippo, effectively believes."

I turned into the High School parking lot, which basically brought the conversation to an end. I'd want to pick it up again later, though probably privately with Jocelyn and Clarissa, to avoid revealing any specifics of my indiscretions or creating animosity and suspicion between Elizaveta and my friends.

Elizaveta was waiting just inside the main doors and came out when she saw me pull up. I got out and went around to the passenger side, and Jocelyn got out of the seat.

"I hope you don't mind sitting in the back," Jocelyn said to Elizaveta. "It's really uncomfortable for me."

"We should have taken your car, Jos," I said. "I wish I'd thought of that earlier. We really don't have time to go back to campus to change cars."

"It's OK," Elizaveta said. "I don't mind."

She got into the back seat with Clarissa, and Jocelyn got into the passenger seat. I shut the door, walked around to the other side of the car, got in, started the engine, and pulled away.

The girls chatted amiably, which gave me more time to think about the situation with my parents and Liz, which wasn't necessarily a good thing. I'd turned the situation over in my mind so many times and hadn't come up with a resolution. I feared that the conclusion to which Jocelyn and Clarissa had arrived was, sadly, the most likely reason behind my dad's behavior, and if so, the only thing that would resolve the situation would be a spiritual reawakening.

What bugged me was that my dad had been Orthodox for twenty-four years, and somehow, it hadn't truly penetrated beyond his external conformity to Orthodox ritual and Orthodox behavioral norms. There had been times in the past when I wondered if I was just 'going through the motions', but those thoughts had been fleeting, and I was reasonably sure that my heart drove my behavior, not some desire to conform.

As I thought more about what Clarissa and Jocelyn had said, I realized it was very likely accurate -- that my dad was feeling guilty for a host of reasons, from his pre-marital sex with my mom to failing to protect Liz to failing to instill 'proper behavior' in me, all of which made him feel as something of a failure. I didn't see him that way, and I realized I hadn't told him that. Maybe THAT was the way to get through to him. I checked my watch and made a decision.

"We need to stop at the County Administration Building," I said. "It's just across the street from the Courthouse."

XXXV. 'Dad'

December 11, 1984, Rutherford, Ohio

"What do you want us to do?" Clarissa asked.

"If you and Jocelyn will just wait here, Elizaveta and I will go get my dad."

"You're that confident?"

"No, but I have to *seem* confident to successfully make the case to my dad. And I have less than ten minutes in which to do that."

Jocelyn and I got out of the car, then Clarissa and Elizaveta got out of the back seats. I took Elizaveta's hand and led her into the County Administration Building. We took the stairs to the second floor, then continued down the hall to the Property Division offices.

"Hi, Mike!" the receptionist, Mrs. Vogel, said, greeting me.

"Hi, Mrs. Vogel. This is my fiancée, Elizaveta. We need to see my dad, please."

"Nice to meet you, Elizaveta! Congratulations, Mike!"

"Thanks."

"Your dad is in his office. Go on back."

She buzzed, and we went through the low, swinging door into the office and went to where my dad sat. He had a small private office, and I stopped at the door and knocked.

"Hi, Dad," I said.

"Mike? What are you doing here?"

"Can we come in, please?"

He gave me a funny look, but I was confident that bringing Elizaveta with me would ensure he'd at least give me a chance to speak, even if he wouldn't listen to what I said.

"I suppose," he replied.

Elizaveta and I stepped into the office, and I shut the door behind us.

"I want you to come across the street to the courthouse," I said. "Not to approve, but to be there for Mom, Elizaveta, and me."

He frowned, "Your mom is there?"

"I'm assuming she is," I replied. "And I suspect you believe she is."

He grimaced and looked down at the desk, avoiding eye contact.

"Dad," I said, speaking confidently but quietly, "I don't have much time because Paul and Liz can't wait on us, but I want to say one very important thing to you -- you were, and are, a good dad; I mean that. I could confidently get up each day and know there was a roof over my head, good food on the table, warm clothes to wear, and parents who loved me and who were there for me. Parents who

would help me be successful, and more importantly, would be there to help me if I got into trouble. I haven't needed that last help very often, but I knew you were there if I did. If you remember, I came to YOU when Liz and I both needed help. You loved us, trusted us, cared for us, and helped us fix a problem that threatened to destroy both of us. Please don't throw that away. Come across the street with us."

He was quiet and said nothing, which told me I might be having some success.

"John tells us," I continued, speaking softly, "that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and forgives our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. I'm not talking about Liz or Paul or Mom or me but about you. If you confessed sleeping with Mom before you married, which I'm sure you did in your life confession before your chrismation, then you're forgiven. If you confessed whatever failings you saw in yourself as a dad, then you're forgiven. And whatever you might think, I do not blame you for anything that happened. I love you, and I don't want this family destroyed."

He was quiet but had looked up and was staring stoically at me.

"Dad," Elizaveta said softly, "please come to the wedding."

At that instant, I realized I should have kept my mouth shut and simply allowed Elizaveta to speak those six words because tears began streaming down my dad's face. Elizaveta walked over to the desk, took some tissues from a box, and handed them to my dad. He blew his nose, then took another tissue to dab his eyes. He got up, and the three of us left his office.

"I'll be back in about thirty minutes," Dad said to Mrs. Vogel. "I have a wedding to go to."

"Mike?" she asked in surprise.

"No," my dad replied. "Liz. Mike will have a church wedding next May. Liz is going before a judge."

We went down the stairs and out into the parking lot. I decided to walk with my dad across the street, so I handed my keys to a very surprised Clarissa and asked her to bring my car across the street. Wide-eyed, she took the keys, and she and Jocelyn got into my Mustang while Elizaveta and I walked across the street. The five of us met on the steps of the courthouse, then went inside and up to the second floor. We found the correct courtroom where Liz, Paul, and two other couples were waiting.

"Hi, Mom," I said with a silly grin.

She looked up and went just as wide-eyed as Clarissa had been in the parking lot.

"Peter?!" Mom gasped.

"DAD?!" Liz squealed, hurrying over.

"Hi," he said sheepishly.

"What did Mike say?" Mom asked.

"A lot," Dad said with a smile, "but it was one word from Elizaveta that changed my mind. She called me 'Dad'."

I left them and moved a few paces to where Paul was sitting.

"I don't know how you did it," he said. "But thanks."

"You're welcome. You only get one chance here, I hope you realize."

"Got any advice?"

"If my dad wants to dress you down for your behavior in the past, allow him to do it. Take it like a man and admit your mistakes. Then tell him you love Liz and you'll never ever do anything to hurt her."

Paul nodded and pulled a slip of paper in a piece of clear plastic used for wallet photos from his pocket and showed it to me. I chuckled because written on the slip of paper was 'Harding County Morgue' along with the address and phone number.

"I carry this with me all the time," he replied. "You made your point quite succinctly."

"Good," I grinned. "Just treat Liz properly, and my dad will come around. Give him grandkids, and that'll help."

Paul laughed, "I think you'll need to talk to your sister about that one! She's talking years, not months before she gets pregnant."

"I'll leave that one for the two of you to sort out," I grinned.

A bailiff came into the room and asked for the couples being married to come forward. They moved through the swinging gate of the 'bar' to wait for the judge. The rest of us moved to the front row of benches to sit, along with several other people who were there for the other couples. About five minutes later, a clerk came in to confirm that the marriage certificates were in order, and a few minutes after that, the judge came into the courtroom.

"All rise!" the bailiff called out. "All those having matters before this honorable court draw near, and you shall be heard!"

Rather than go to the bench, the judge came to stand before the three couples. He greeted them, then began the ceremony.

"You are about to enter into a union which is most serious. It is most serious because it will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and intimate that it will profoundly influence your whole future. That future, with its hopes and disappointments, its successes and its failures, its pleasures and its pains, its joys and its sorrows, will unfold before you but is not now known. All the things which I just mentioned are part of every life. Knowing this, you take each other for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health.

"Today, you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life which you two have in common. Henceforth, you will belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affection. And if true love and unselfish spirit of sacrifice guide your every action, you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted to each of you."

"Now, he continued, I'll ask each couple, in turn, to recite their vows."

Paul and Liz were second.

"Do you, Paul, take this woman, Elizabeth, to be your lawful wedded wife, forsaking all others?"

"I do."

"Do you, Elizabeth, take this man, Paul, to be your lawful wedded husband, forsaking all others?"

"I do."

"The rings, please," the judge said.

Paul and Liz exchanged rings, stating the traditional 'With this ring, I thee wed'.

"Now, for as much that Paul and Elizabeth have consented to live together in wedlock, and having declared their intention before me and these witnesses, and with no legal impediments having been shown, I, Judge Warren Melton, by the power vested in me by the State of Ohio and Harding County, do hereby join them together, and declare they are now husband and wife."

He completed the vows for the third couple.

"You may all kiss your brides!" he said with a grin.

They did, and all of us assembled to watch applauded. The judge signed the marriage certificates, the clerk stamped them and then handed them to each of the men.

"How long can you stay, Mike?" Dad asked quietly.

"Elizaveta has a 10:00pm curfew," I replied.

Dad shook his head, "Given the maturity she's shown, I think you and I need the curfews, not her."

"TELL me about it," I chuckled. "She's certainly seized control of the situation."

"Careful, husband," Elizaveta warned with her prim smile.

"His master's voice," Jocelyn teased.

"As it should be!" Elizaveta replied, squeezing my hand.

"If it's OK," Dad said, "we'll take everyone to Lou's for dinner tonight."

"I think that's up to Liz," I said.

"We'll join you," she said. "We were just going to have a quiet dinner."

"I need to go back to the office," Dad said. "Shall we say 6:00pm at Lou's?"

Everyone agreed, and when we left, Dad went back to work, Paul and Liz went home so he could nap, given he had to work at 11:00pm, and the rest of us went to my parents' house, where Mom made tea for everyone.

"What exactly did you say to Peter?" Mom asked Elizaveta.

"I just said, 'Dad, please come to the wedding', and he started crying. But that was after Mike told him that he was a good dad, no matter what he thought of himself."

"Thank you," Mom said with what could only be described as a sound of relief.

"We're not out of the woods just yet," I said. "I advised Paul that if Dad wants to dress him down, he should take it like a man and admit his mistakes. I honestly think Dad needs to get it off his chest to get to a place where he can at least be cordial to Paul. He was there for Liz and Elizaveta today."

"But that's huge, Mike," Mom said. "I was fairly certain he'd leave me if he found out I was at the wedding."

"I was fairly certain he'd leave you, period," I replied. "Lissa and Jos agreed. You two need marital counseling."

"Says my son, who is only recently betrothed!"

"And who has been to six pre-marital counseling sessions, not to mention dinners with the Sokolovs, and considerable time with his two closest female friends who help him not be a total «глупец» (*glupys*)! Oh, and who has had to work out serious issues with his future wife in the past few weeks. Ask Father Herman for a recommendation for a secular counselor. I say that because Doctor Mercer has been a huge help." ("Blockhead")

"Why not her?"

"Because I think that would create difficult conflicts for her given how our relationship is developing, both as receiving counseling and for helping Angie. And in the future, we might have a professional relationship. I'm sure she could suggest someone locally."

"Why secular?" Elizaveta asked.

"Because Father Herman will need to do some serious remedial work on my dad's spiritual health. That lets him focus on what is the core issue here, at least as I see it."

"Sorry to change subjects," Mom said, "but how are things at home, Jocelyn?"

I barely managed to avoid cringing. The LAST thing I wanted was for Jocelyn to discuss why her parents and she were on the outs, as that would reveal specific information which Elizaveta had agreed I didn't need to share.

"Better," Jocelyn replied. "Mom and Dad finally came to terms with everything."

The look Elizaveta had on her face concerned me because it seemed as if she was evaluating Jocelyn as to whether or not she was a past lover. As that concern faded, I had to suppress a laugh because the TRUE threat in the room, according to everyone who knew, was Clarissa, and Elizaveta would never suspect I'd been with her. And at that moment, I realized the TRUE risk -- I could get away with it with Lissa because Elizaveta would never suspect her. That revelation rocked me back mentally, as if I'd been punched in the jaw by Muhammad Ali. Now I understood EXACTLY what Father Nicholas had meant and why he'd said what he had said.

"Same here," Clarissa said. "Well, Mom came to terms with it. Dad is 'trying to deal with it', as he says."

"Which is better than before," I replied. "The next step is for them to meet Abby!"

"Is she your girlfriend, Clarissa?" Mom asked.

Clarissa smiled, "Yes. And thank you for calling her my girlfriend and not trying to find some neutral term."

"I don't claim to understand at all, but I don't see any point in being rude."

"I think the easiest answer," I interjected, "is that none of us is able to choose who we love or to whom we're attracted."

"Do any of you think Elizaveta would CHOOSE to be attracted to Mike?" Jocelyn teased.

All the women laughed, but Elizaveta squeezed my hand, which said she HAD chosen me.

"A prophet has no honor in his hometown," I replied smugly.

"Well, he's not the first man to have a 'God complex', that's for sure!" Mom said.

"Oh, he doesn't," Clarissa smirked. "HIS god is sitting next to him on the loveseat! And he knows it!"

All the women laughed again, and I just smiled. I didn't mind the teasing at all, and honestly, I hadn't seen a hint from Elizaveta that she'd be controlling, just that she'd help me be the man I wanted to be or to look at it another way, the man I ought to be.

"How are the wedding plans coming along?" Mom asked.

"Who knows?" I replied with a shrug. "We left those up to Elizaveta's grandmothers. If you want input, you'll need to take it up with them. I, for one, am staying completely out of it!"

"Me, too," Elizaveta said. "They can plan the wedding any way they wish. It's after the wedding when they do not get to tell me how to run *my* household!"

Mom laughed, "I had the same conversation with my mother. I never met my grandparents, and we're not sure what happened to them. My mom and dad got out of Russia in 1936, at a time when almost nobody could get out. Someone my grandfather knew fixed a travel permit for them to visit Paris. As soon as they got to Paris, they arranged to travel to New York as immigrants. They left their families in Russia and never heard from them again. Peter's grandparents died when Mike was little."

"My dad's family came here via Alaska in the 19th century," Elizaveta said. "My mom's family came over at the time of the Revolution. What about your great-grandparents, Clarissa and Jocelyn?"

"All of mine died before I turned ten," Clarissa said.

"I still have two great-grandmothers," Jocelyn said. "My great-grandfathers died in 1976 and 1979. Mike, are your grandparents from Chicago coming to your wedding?"

"They're on the list I gave to Elizaveta's grandmothers. I don't know if Mom told them."

"I did. They plan to be here despite their fear that Satan lives in our church!"

I shook my head, "According to them, we're idolaters, worship Mary as a goddess, and do a host of other satanic things, claims which are about as accurate as the claims that early Christians engaged in child sacrifice, which supplied the elements for the Eucharist, which was itself the culmination of an orgy!"

"What?!" Elizaveta exclaimed.

I grinned, "The Romans heard that the early Christians had 'love feasts' and equated those with the Bacchic mystery cults. The Bacchanalia was allegedly a drunken orgy, though we only have Livy's claims about it to go by. And you can imagine how the cannibalism claim arose in relation to the Eucharist being the 'body and blood of Christ'.

"Some Romans also made fun of the Christians as atheists because they didn't worship the gods all Romans were supposed to worship in common. Other Romans accused the Christians of practicing 'private' religion for the same reason. You can see an example of the mockery in a graffito displayed in a museum on the Palatine Hill in Rome which shows a crucified donkey with the text 'Alexamenos worships his god' written in Greek under it."

"Greek?" Jocelyn asked.

"The *lingua franca* of the western part of the Roman Empire was Latin, but in the east, it was Greek. Nearly all the early Christian writings are in Greek, though there is a bit of Aramaic in the New Testament. It's no more surprising that someone would have written the text in Greek than it would be to find, say, Spanish graffiti in Los Angeles. The different languages are actually the source of the theological divisions between East and West -- Augustine of Hippo couldn't read Greek very well, if at all, and that caused no end of trouble!"

"According to Mike!" Jocelyn declared.

"It's hard to do accurate theology when all the important original source material is in Greek, and you have to rely on translations of varying and suspect quality! There's a reason we use Greek terms to discuss Christology. But we're getting WAY off-topic here. Suffice it to say that my grandparents are of the Tim Saddler variety of Protestant."

"But you wiped the floor with him!" Elizaveta declared.

"Family peace is more important than theology," Mom said. "It took some time for them to accept Peter's conversion, though they did come to our wedding. Obviously, I missed something; what happened?"

"A Calvinist preacher was on campus and started harassing our friends Robby and Lee," Clarissa said. "Mike stepped up to refute the harsh judgment the preacher was calling down on Robby and Lee, and a debate started there. In the end, at the encouragement of other students, especially Melody, Mike challenged the Reverend to a formal debate. That happened about six weeks ago, and Mike kicked his ass from McKinley to the Pennsylvania state line and back!"

"Mike? My son? The one who positively hates confrontation?"

"The one who told Paul to carry the address to the Harding County Morgue in his pocket so he could drive himself there if he ever hurt Liz to save the Coroner the effort?" Clarissa asked with a silly smile. "When someone attacks or hurts someone Mike loves, he'll step up to defend them. He did that with Liz."

Mom took a deep breath and let it out, "He did, and we condemned him for it."

"Forget what happened in the past," I replied. "It's water under the bridge and irrelevant. What's important now is ensuring nothing like that happens again in the future."

"Have you ever held a grudge against anyone?" Clarissa asked.

"Just one person," I replied.

"Dean Parker?"

"Doctor Orosco," Mom said before I could answer. "I think this entire family has a grudge against that «cyka» (suka)!" ("bitch")

Clarissa and I both broke up laughing while Elizaveta looked confused.

"What are you talking about?" Elizaveta asked. "I don't know this person."

"Mom," I said before she could reply, "please let me handle it."

I stood up and tugged gently on Elizaveta's hand. I thought about going up to my room, but that would send a message I didn't want to send, so I led her downstairs.

"The Summer after I graduated, when Liz had all of her troubles, a psychiatrist named Doctor Jeanette Orosco tried to convince everyone that I had sexually abused Liz from the time she was three."

"WHAT?!" Elizaveta gasped.

"It's a lie, of course," I said, "but, for a time, there was a risk I was going to be charged with a crime because that doctor lied to my parents, Family Services, Family Court, and the County Prosecutor."

"And she's still a doctor?!"

"As our family attorney said, it was far more important to clear my name in private than to try to publicly discredit her. I followed his advice, and all of that has disappeared now."

"But why would she say that?"

"She needed a culprit on whom she could blame Liz's risky behavior, and she chose me. The truth didn't matter, and she almost got away with it."

"But why?"

"Because for her, it was an article of faith that no girl would ever engage in risky behavior unless she was abused by someone first. She felt that because Liz was engaging in heavy petting with her boyfriend at thirteen, that proved Liz had been abused. Let me ask you this -- do you have friends who were interested in boys at thirteen? Or who kissed boys at thirteen?"

"Sure. At least half my friends made out when they were thirteen or fourteen. I was interested in boys two years ago! You, specifically!"

I smiled but ignored her added comment, "And did anyone abuse you or your friends?"

"No, of course not!"

"So?"

"What a «cyka» (*suka*)!" Elizaveta growled. ("bitch")

"Exactly. Once properly confronted, she backed down, but it took some smart lawyering on the part of our family attorney. My mom works for him, which helped, and it was Doctor Mercer's testimony, along with another psychologist, that refuted what the «cyka» (*suka*) claimed." ("bitch")

"So that's how you met her? Doctor Mercer, I mean."

"Yes. She interviewed both Liz and me, as did her colleague Doctor Paulus, and they concluded that the «cyka» (*suka*) was full of...«навоз» (*navoz*)! ("manure")

Elizaveta laughed, "You were going to use a harsher word! What surprises me is that you seem to know all the bad words even if your Russian isn't very good!"

"Blame my grandfather and his friends!" I replied. "So you were interested in me two years ago?"

"All the girls were! We were all jealous of Katy Malenkova! Now the girls are jealous of me!"

"And I was lucky enough to get you," I said. "I'm very happy about what you said to my dad earlier."

She smiled, "I just reminded him of what you told me he'd promised!"

I smiled and held my arms out. Elizaveta melted into them and molded her body to mine. I held her tightly, we exchanged a soft kiss, and then to her chagrin, I led her back upstairs to rejoin the others. We hung out together until my dad arrived home, and after he changed into casual clothes, all of us headed for Rutherford, with Jocelyn riding with my parents so Elizaveta could ride in the front seat of my Mustang.

We had a great meal, and although my dad said only a few words to Paul, the fact that he spoke to him at all was, in my mind, a minor miracle. When we finished our meal, we went for ice cream, despite the Nativity Fast, and at about 8:30pm, I said we had to leave.

"If you need me to call Viktor Kozlov and get an extension so Elizaveta can stay out with us, I will," Dad said.

I smiled, "I appreciate that, but I think it's important to have her home by 10:00pm because she has school tomorrow morning, just as I do. And I do need an hour or so to read material for tomorrow. Exams are coming up next week, too, so sleep is important."

"Thanks so much for coming, Mikey!" Liz gushed.

"You're welcome. And congratulations!"

We hugged, and then I shook hands with Paul. The girls all hugged Liz, and then we said 'goodbye' and left the ice cream shop. Elizaveta, Clarissa, Jocelyn, and I got into my Mustang with Jocelyn in the front, and we headed back to McKinley.



December 15, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Hi, Mark! Hi, Alyssa!" I said to the teens after Vespers on Saturday. "How are you today?"

"Great!" Alyssa said. "Can we ask some questions?"

"Of course."

"Why did the bishop simply stay by the fancy chair for most of the service?"

"That's fairly common at Vespers," I replied. "Most of the service is done by the chanters, choir, and deacon, but as we don't have a deacon, the priest fulfills that role. If we did have a deacon, the priest would mostly be quiet, as the bishop usually gives the benedictions at the end of the prayers. If you were to come for Matins tomorrow, the main thing that happens with the bishop is that the subdeacons help him put on his vestments. Usually, he'll then serve the Divine Liturgy in the place of the priest, who will only have things to do because we don't have a deacon."

"Is it normal to not have a deacon?"

"Most smaller churches don't have one, but some do. Larger churches almost always have them. The church I grew up in was relatively small but had a deacon. This church is larger and normally has one, but he reposed away last Summer."

"Reposed?" Mark asked.

"The way Orthodox say he passed away," I replied.

"Oh!" Alyssa said. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Will you get a new deacon?" Mark asked.

"Yes," I replied. "The bishop intends to ordain me to the diaconate next Summer after I marry."

"Does that mean eventually you'll be a priest?" Alyssa asked.

"Not a chance!" I replied, smiling and shaking my head. "That is not something I'm called to, but it's also incompatible with being a physician."

"Why is that?"

"Both are more than full-time jobs. A deacon's role is limited to the services at the church and whatever other roles the bishop or priest assign to him. In this parish, it's to be responsible for distributing alms as the need arises, which is the traditional role of the deacon. A priest, on the other hand, is always on call for his parishioners just as a doctor is for his patients."

"Why not ordain you now?" she asked.

"Then I'd have to take a vow of chastity," I replied. "We ordain married men, but once a man is ordained, he isn't permitted to marry."

"Interesting," Mark said. "I'm curious: do we need our parents' permission to become catechumens?"

"You don't need permission. All that's necessary is for you to attend the Divine Liturgy on Sunday mornings as well as come to catechism, though we can work with your schedule for that, and it doesn't have to be here at the church. If you're serious about it, then you need to talk with Father Nicholas. I'm curious: do you two plan to go to college?"

"We were both accepted at Taft," Mark replied. "She's majoring in psychology, and I'm majoring in physics."

"I suppose we need to talk to our parents if we want to come to the services on Sundays," Alyssa said.

"Once you do that, then let me know, and I'll make arrangements for you to meet with Father Nicholas."

"And you'll do our catechism?" Mark asked.

"If Father Nicholas assigns me to do it, yes. That would be normal, but it is up to him."

"How can we get in touch with you?"

"I'm the RA for the eighth floor of Rickenbacker dorm. I'll give you the number to the switchboard. You can't direct dial into the rooms, so just ask for me and they'll transfer the call. I'll also give you the direct number to where I'll be staying over Christmas break."

"Where are you from, originally?" Alyssa asked.

"West Monroe, about forty-five minutes west of here. Once I started working Summers here in McKinley, I made arrangements to live here."

"What about when you marry?"

"My fiancée is from McKinley, and we'll live in a small house her parents own. I'm going to McKinley Medical School next Fall."

"That's right," Alyssa said. "You told us about that."

"I haven't seen Reverend Saddler on campus," I said.

"He accepted a temporary call from a church in Rutherford which lost its pastor. The rumor is he'll take the full-time job if they offer it to him. But he was never coming back on campus and probably would have lost his role as Youth Pastor. There are a lot of people who are upset that you trounced him at that debate."

"It's easy to win when both history and the truth are on your side, and your opponent fights on the ground of your choosing."

"You think you could have lost?"

"I think he could have done a much better job," I replied. "Winning or losing is subjective and depends on the thoughts of each individual observer. From what you two have said, his people thought he lost. That's pretty bad."

"No kidding!" Mark replied. "We'll talk to our parents and see if we can come to church tomorrow morning. We want to see a service with the bishop."

"I hope to see you then. Matins is at 8:00am," I said. "The Divine Liturgy starts about 9:00am. I'll be busy, of course, but my friend Tasha will be happy to help you in any way you need. Her dad is the deacon at my old church."

"The pretty blonde?" Alyssa asked.

"Yes."

"We'll see you in the morning!"

We said 'goodnight', and after I locked up the church, I headed back to campus to begin studying for final exams.



December 16, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"Mark and Alyssa are planning to be here for Matins and the Divine Liturgy," I said to Father Nicholas when he arrived at church on Sunday morning.

"Have they spoken to their parents?"

"They were going to do that last night," I replied. "They seemed fairly confident, though given what I've heard is going on at Faith Bible Church, I'm not so sure."

"What?"

"Well, in addition to the situation with those three kids who beat up my friends, Mark and Alyssa told me that Reverend Saddler left to pastor a church in Rutherford, at least on a temporary basis, and it appears there's quite a bit of recrimination over the outcome of the debate. Supposedly, he was about to be removed as Youth Pastor at Faith Bible Church, so he's going to take that job in Rutherford full-time if they offer it."

"He did a very poor job of representing his church. You wouldn't have been able to score points the way you did off someone who was better informed and at least knew some Christian history."

"And you know I generally leave those arguments to the bishops, just as you told me you and Father Jacobs did."

"It does make for friendlier encounters!"

Subdeacon Alexi arrived, and we discussed the bishop's direction for the service. We didn't have a deacon, so I would do the litanies, but otherwise, it was a standard Hierarchical Divine Liturgy. We made all the preparations, including assembling the *trikirion* and *dikirion*. Just before Matins began, I saw Mark and Alyssa walk into the nave and move to stand near Tasha and Nik.

Matins went along as usual, and when the choir began chanting the canon, Subdeacon Alexi and I helped the bishop into his vestments. From there, it was the usual hectic pace of a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy, where Subdeacon Alexi and I constantly had things to do, and the absence of a deacon made it even more hectic.

When the service ended, everyone went to the parish hall for a Lenten lunch and to listen to the bishop's teaching, which replaced Sunday School, as he was *the* teacher for his churches. The topic was sin, and what he said stood out, especially given my friendship with Clarissa, Robby, and Lee, but also because of my own sinful behavior.

"There are," Vladyka ARKADY said, "some sins which are involuntary, unwilled, unchosen; sins which overcome people and force them by irrational impulses and compulsions, by weaknesses of the flesh, emotional drives, and misguided desires into actions which they themselves do not want, and often despise and abhor -- even when they are engaging in them. Traditionally, we would call these 'sins of passion'. It's important to remember that the fact that these sins are not freely chosen does not make them any less sinful. As you all know, to sin means to miss the mark, to be off the track, to deviate, to defile, to transgress, whether or not the act is consciously willed and purposefully enacted; and whether or not the individual is freely and fully at fault.

"All temptations, passions, and sins, including those deeply, and oftentimes seemingly indelibly embedded in our nature by our sorrowful inheritance, can be cured, and sinful actions can cease. With God, all things are possible! When

Christians are willing to struggle, and when they receive patient, compassionate, and authentically loving assistance from the Church, their families, and their friends, they can gain victory over any sin. No sin is worse than any other in its ability to separate us from God. Each of us struggles with our own temptations and sins; for no one is without this struggle in one form or another, and no one is without sin but God.

"God gives us victory over sin, in ways known to Himself, yet aided by the Mysteries of the Church and the loving care of our fellow Christians. The victory, however, belongs only to the courageous souls who acknowledge their condition, face their resentments, express their angers, confess their sins, forgive their offenders, who almost always include their parents and members of their households, and reach out for help with the genuine desire to be healed. Confession, together with the Eucharist, cleanses your soul and provides the medicine you need for victory over death, which is the TRUE disease and which is the source of all our sins.

"And I want you to know that I, too, am a sinful man. So is Father Nicholas. So are the two subdeacons who are here. We reject the heresy of Donatism, which stated that God's mysteries could only be effectively administered by sinless men. This is not meant, in any way, to excuse our sins or to encourage you to continue in sin because the clergy are themselves sinful. Rather, it is to acknowledge that each and every one of us -- from the infant Elias to the men who helped found this parish while they were young, Valentin and Nikolay; from the newest inquirer to the Patriarch in Moscow -- are sinners in need of salvation, to be rescued from death by Jesus Christ who is victorious in trampling down death by death."

He continued on for a few minutes, then gave a blessing and dismissed the congregation.

"That was really powerful," Mark said, coming up to me.

I nodded, "It was."

"Why not give that message during the service? His sermon was only maybe ten minutes long."

"Which is the norm for our homilies," I said. "As with today, they're usually reflections on the life of the saint, or the day we're celebrating, or on the Scripture readings. During Great Lent, each Sunday has a theme, and usually, the homily is on that theme, which is also true for each of the Feast days. Next week, for example, we celebrate the ancestors of Jesus, going back to Adam and Eve because Nativity, or Christmas, follows a few days later. Today, we celebrated the Prophet Haggai and the Holy Empress, Theophano the Wonderworker."

"I hear you refer to your bishop in different ways. Why?"

"'Vladyka' is a Slavic word meaning, approximately, 'Master', and that's why you heard the choir chant 'Master, Bless!' before the dismissal both last night and this morning, rather than 'Father, Bless!' as they normally do for the priest. So we use it when speaking to or about the bishop, though, technically, it's Russian, so it should be properly declined. Most English speakers, myself included, don't do that; if we did, it would change the ending vowel.

"Anyway, the English equivalent would be 'Your Grace', though then you need to know if he's a bishop or a metropolitan because, for a metropolitan, you would say 'Your Eminence'. It's just easier to use 'Vladyka' because it works for both. Technically, as I said, it's bad Russian because it needs to be properly declined. And just for completeness, the Arab churches use '*Sayidna*'. The Greek equivalent is '*Despota*', but they usually use the English 'Your Grace'."

"Can we talk to the priest now?" Mark asked.

"I know he's meeting with the bishop, so it might be difficult to do today. What about Wednesday after Vespers? I'm sure he'll be available then."

"Sure! 6:00pm?"

"Yes."

We said 'goodbye', and I went to find Elizaveta so we could head to Tasha's apartment for the afternoon.

XXXVI. End of the Semester

December 16, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"That was an interesting speech by your bishop," Clarissa said as we relaxed in my room after studying for Monday's Analytical Chemistry exam.

"You mean because it sounded like he was speaking directly to me? Or to you?"

"It almost seemed as if he were excusing sin."

"I understand how you could hear it that way, but what he was doing was acknowledging the power it has over us. Paul wrote about it in Romans 7. Believe it or not, I don't have that entire passage memorized, so I'll need to get my Bible."

Clarissa nodded, "OK."

I took down the NKJV, which was the text we used, as there wasn't an Orthodox Bible in English in print. There was a group trying to create and publish one, with a full translation of the Septuagint, but so far, that was only a dream, not a reality. I opened the Bible, turned to Romans 7, and found the passage.

"For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin."

"So," I continued, "Paul is saying that at least some of his sin is involuntary, in the sense he's compelled by forces he is unable to personally control. The solution is the same as the one Vladyka ARKADY gave -- God's grace and power, which are sufficient. And note well, salvation is from *death*, not sin."

"I'm curious, how would a priest deal with someone who was a practicing homosexual?"

"The same way he dealt with a fornicator," I replied with a grin. "With pastoral love."

"But wouldn't being freed from sin mean a lifetime of chastity for someone who was exclusively lesbian or gay?"

I nodded, "It would, as it would for any heterosexual who wasn't married. Granted, heterosexuals have access to marriage and, thus, an approved outlet for sexual desires, which places the heavier burden on the gay or lesbian person. I don't know any way around that within Orthodox teaching."

"So the 'cure', if you will, is not from the desire, but from the activity."

"Which is what I've told you all along. Honestly, Lissa, I don't know what to tell you other than that God loves you, and I love you. But that doesn't change the fact that sex outside of marriage is a sin. Missing the mark, not a complete break with God, but still a sin. But you know I don't let that affect how I treat you. I'm called to treat you with the same love and mercy that I show every person I know."

"I wasn't accusing you of treating me badly. I was just trying to understand what he was trying to say. That said, I totally understand why your priest was giving you what amounts to leeway. He understood your weakness and the struggles you were having and let it play out, if you will, while nudging you in the correct direction."

"That's pretty much the point of what both priests told me about how they usually deal with teens and young adults. I was probably something of an outlier, given the number of partners I had."

"You kept that from him, right? Just spoke about being sexually active?"

"Yes, though he knew it was more than one or two girls. And, to be honest, I was truly at the end of the leash. Without Lara's urging, I probably wouldn't have a chance to be ordained, and I sure wouldn't have been able to, in good conscience, start seeing Elizaveta. I also discovered something last Tuesday."

"What's that?"

"Why several people have said you're the biggest risk in the future."

"Because your «Котёнок» (*katyonak*) would never suspect her husband of having an affair with a lesbian girl and wouldn't believe anyone who suggested it was happening. In other words, you could, for want of a better term, get away with it. And that makes me riskier than anyone else." ("Kitten")

"You're pretty smart, Lissa," I replied.

"You also know Elizaveta suspects you've been with Jocelyn. I saw the look she was giving Jocelyn, as if she was looking inside her to see if she was one of the 'loose women' you were with."

"There was nothing 'loose' about Jocelyn," I smirked. "Especially after the reconstructive surgery tightened things up for a snugger fit!"

"You PIG!" Clarissa exclaimed but then laughed hard.

"I'd never say something like that to anyone but you, though Jocelyn did make that point when we talked about making love after her surgery. Supposedly, her doctor told her that was something positive that came out of all the bad stuff."

"And given you're bigger than average both in length and girth, at least according to our Reproductive Physiology text, I'm sure you had zero complaints!"

"Any man who complains about how it feels to be inside a woman is an idiot and is asking to have his gonads violently removed!"

"If he's lucky!" Clarissa declared. "But honestly, I can't see you cheating, even in the most stressful situation."

"Drugs? Alcohol?"

Clarissa shook her head, "You don't have that kind of personality. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be on guard for signs of being overstressed."

"A good point. And given we're talking about medical school, have you decided what you're going to do about living accommodations?"

"I'm reasonably sure I'll move in with Abby after graduation. How are you handling the transition?"

"I'll move all my stuff to the cottage during final exam week, then sleep at Doctor Blahnik's house on Friday and Saturday nights. Friday the guys are having the bachelor party at Doctor Blahnik's house, then Saturday, we're at the country club with the men from church and some of the guys. The bridal shower is a week before the wedding on Sunday afternoon. Where does Abby live?"

"About six blocks from Doctor Blahnik's house."

"What about getting to school?"

"I'll buy a car when we get back from Europe. Something used, obviously. It just needs to get me to and from school. Do you know what Sandy is planning?"

"She and Pete haven't worked that out just yet. They aren't ready to get married, so the married dorms are out at either school. I'd guess they'll get an apartment together, which is what Fran and Jason are talking about doing."

"We should probably get to bed," Clarissa said. "We have our exam at 8:00am."

"Agreed."

We said 'good night', hugged, and after my bathroom routine and my evening prayers, I got into bed and quickly fell asleep.



December 19, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"How are your exams going?" Father Nicholas asked when I arrived at church on Wednesday evening.

"Three down, all of which I did well on, I'm sure. There's just one to go, on Friday, and that's Reproductive Physiology. That should be easy."

Father Nicholas cleared his throat and made a silly face, "From all the hands-on experimentation?"

"Given that most of what I need to study is about gestation and childbirth, I have exactly zero experience! And I do believe that's the first time I've heard you crack a joke that was even slightly off-color!"

"I was quite sure you wouldn't be offended!"

"A good point! Before I forget, Mark and Alyssa will be here tonight and want to speak with you."

"Good. Are you able to do catechism?"

"Yes."

"What classes do you have next semester?"

"Physical Chemistry, with a lab, Statistical Methods For Biology, Abnormal Psychology, and Russian Literature."

"Abnormal Psych? Did you decide on that because of Angie?"

"Yes. I want to learn more so I can understand better how to help her."

"Have you spoken to her recently?"

"I call her about every two weeks, and we talk for a few minutes. She's on antidepressants, which they've tried to wean her from, but she regresses when they do. She's totally off the antipsychotics, but if she has a breakdown, they'll have to put her back on them. She's working and taking a class."

"Good."

"Back to Mark and Alyssa, is it possible that they'll be able to be chrismated at Pascha?"

"Four months is an awfully short time, but it's really up to you to tell me if they're ready. But you know we can chrismate them anytime, not just at Pascha."

"They'll need baptism, actually. Neither of them has been baptized."

"I'll contact the Cathedral to see if we can borrow their horse trough for Lazarus Saturday, if we need it."

I chuckled, "I always found it amusing."

"It's the only reasonable way to have an adult baptism without going to a river or lake, or using a bathtub of some sort. And we don't do enough adult baptisms to warrant having our own trough. Most of our converts have been baptized at one point or another before they become inquirers. What did their parents say?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea. The fact that they were here was all I concerned myself with."

"I'll ask, but just kind of in a general 'what do your families think?' way. Shall we vest?"

I nodded, and we went into the altar and then into the vestry. Just under an hour later, we returned to the vestry, having completed the Vespers service. Father went to talk to Mark and Alyssa while I went to talk to Elizaveta in the narthex. We moved away from her parents so we could speak privately.

"How are your exams going?" she asked.

"Good. And yours?"

"Good. I'm looking forward to the next two weeks! Will we see each other every day?"

"I think so. Do you think your dad will allow you to come to a New Year's Eve party at Milena's house?"

"We're betrothed!" she exclaimed. "You get to decide, not him!"

"Let me rephrase," I said with a smile. "Do you think your dad would object if I took you to a New Year's Eve Party? It does violate your curfew."

"Again, YOU decide!"

I shook my head, "Not on that topic. You're only fifteen, and he is still your father. On May 26th, then you and I make all the decisions, though without giving offense, of course."

"Listen, HUSBAND," she said fiercely. "You decide! You tell my dad what we are doing!"

"Yes, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I replied. ("Kitten")

"Are you patronizing me, Michael Peter Loucks?" she demanded. "Because if you are..."

"What?" I chuckled, "Damage the ONE thing you want from me right now, which you can't have?"

"You're being mean again!" she said mirthfully. "But I have no way to punish you without punishing myself!"

"Hmm..." I smirked.

"I think I need to speak to the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*)!"
("Grandmothers' Cabal")

"And you know what they will tell you? That until the crowning, your dad is still in charge."

"Arrrrgggggh!" she groused, screwing up her face.

"Let me go speak with him. I'll be right back."

She made another face but waited while I went to talk to her dad, who gave his permission for her to stay out, so long as Elizaveta was always with me, which I was sure wouldn't be a problem for her, then went back to tell her.

"He said 'yes', of course," I said.

"Five months!" she said in what was almost a whine.

"Patience is a virtue," I replied gently.

"So they say! How are we handling Nativity?"

"I spoke with my mom, and I'll celebrate with your family, then you and I will join my family's celebration at my grandfather's house. My uncle will be there as well."

"I haven't met him. Your mom's brother, right?"

"He and my grandfather had a falling out when my uncle turned eighteen. They're cordial, but that's about it. My grandfather hoped my uncle would be a priest, but my uncle wanted nothing to do with it. He doesn't go to church often. I'm the last hope for my grandfather to have a clergyman in his family before he dies."

"That was important to him?"

"Very. I actually never discussed with him why he thought it was important, and you know I made these decisions on my own. He certainly put a word in the bishop's ear, as did your dad. They each had their own reasons, but I have my own, and of course, the bishop keeps his own counsel."

"So your grandfather didn't talk to you about it first?"

"No. He just expressed his pleasure when I agreed to be ordained a subdeacon. His nudge to get me to accept the bishop's request to ordain me a deacon was the money I told you about -- to ensure I could marry and support a family before I graduated, so I wouldn't have to put things off for another five years."

"So I'm convenient?" she asked, her voice telling me she was teasing.

"I prefer to call it 'opportunity'! As in, I have the opportunity to marry a beautiful, sexy, faithful Russian girl!"

"Very wise words, husband!" she said with a soft laugh.

"And make babies with her," I continued. "After sufficient practice."

Elizaveta stepped as close as she dared, given I was in my cassock.

"Day and night for two weeks?" she whispered sexily.

"Absolutely!" I replied.

"Elizaveta?" her mom called. "We're going home."

"You should go," I said. "I have to talk to Father and possibly to Alyssa and Mark. I'll see you Friday evening."

"OK," she replied.

She grasped my hand and squeezed, which was all she could do as I was wearing my cassock, and left. I went into the nave to pray and wait for Father Nicholas, who came to find me about fifteen minutes later.

"I'm going to assign you as their catechist, but I'm sure you assumed that."

"Given you asked me before, I did. Before tonight, I was reasonably sure, but I assumed nothing. Do you assume what His Grace wants if you're unsure? Or do you ask?"

"Good point," Father Nicholas replied with a grin. "Their parents are neutral. They were at the debate and according to Mark, they're asking tough questions of the pastor."

"There are no tough questions," I replied. "Well, theological ones. I'll leave the tough pastoral questions like 'Why do kids get cancer?' and 'Why did my loved one have to die?' to you."

"And you think I have answers?"

I shook my head, "No, but that doesn't mean you don't have to minister to them as their pastor! I can't explain why bad things happen to good people any more than you can, but nobody expects ME to!"

"Has anyone ever told you that you can be a real pain in the butt?"

"I think the list of people who haven't is exceedingly short, and my soon-to-be wife sure isn't on it!"

"Pushing back against the «бабушка» (*babushka*) in training?"

"Actually, only with regard to treating her dad with proper respect. She doesn't think I should ask him for permission to take her places or keep her out past the curfew he set."

"Well, I happen to agree with you, and if she actually does give you real grief about that, make sure you mention it to Mrs. Sokolov."

"Elizaveta admitted earlier that if she went to any of the «бабушки» (*babushki*), they'd side with me."

"No slip-ups, Subdeacon," he said gently.

"I understand. Did Mark and Alyssa leave?"

"Yes. They have exams tomorrow. They said they'll speak to you on Saturday to make arrangements for catechism. They said you gave them copies of *The Orthodox Church*, which they've both read."

"I did. What prayer rule are you going to assign them?"

"To start with, just the *Trisagion* Prayers in the morning and evening. Make sure you get them copies of the small prayer book on Saturday."

"I will."

"And teach them how to properly say them."

"Obviously," I grinned.

"There are small icons of Christ in the bookstore cabinet that we give to catechumens. I'll bless them on Saturday."

"OK."

"You'll be here every service until Theophany, right?"

"Yes. I'll be with the bishop for Theophany again."

"He let me know. That's inconvenient as it's a Sunday, but we'll manage. Fortunately, once you're a deacon, he won't do that except on rare occasions. You might be called to fill in for Protodeacon Seraphim if he's on vacation, but otherwise, the bishop will generally leave you here. I'll see you on Saturday."

I received his blessing, we both left the church, and after I locked the door, I headed back to campus.



December 21, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"What's playing?" Jocelyn asked when she walked into my room on Friday after lunch.

"It's *Do They Know It's Christmas* by a group called 'Band Aid'. It was done for charity for Ethiopia, and if you listen, you'll hear a bunch of big names in music from Ireland and the UK. I wish we had cable in the dorms because I'd like to see the music video."

"What big names?"

"Phil Collins, Boy George, Kool from Kool & the Gang, Simon Le Bon and the other guys from Duran Duran, George Michael, Sting, the guys from Spandau Ballet, and more."

"Impressive, but it's not all that good."

I shrugged, "Nobody is singing in their style, but I think the point is raising funds to help feed Ethiopia, not that it's a great song. And that's not even mentioning that there are plenty of Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia who do, in fact, know that it's Christmastime!"

"There are Orthodox in Ethiopia?"

"It's about 50% of the population," I replied. "And it's not colonial -- they've been Orthodox since the 1st century. Remember your New Testament? In Acts, Philip converts an Ethiopian to Christianity, and tradition says Saint Matthew preached in Ethiopia."

"Interesting."

"It's the only Christian country to survive the onslaught of Islam in Africa."

"Things I never knew! Where's Clarissa?"

"Packing her clothes. Her mom will be here in about forty minutes."

"You're staying here tonight?"

"Yes, because the dorm is open until noon tomorrow. As far as I can tell, there will only be five or six students on the floor."

"We're still on for dinner next Thursday with Dale?"

"Yes. You're still planning to bring Bill?"

"Yes. I heard you set Dale up with Marie!"

"Hey, he needed a date, and she's not steady with anyone. I'm not expecting anything to come of it!"

Clarissa came into the room with her bag and sat down next to me on the couch.

"One semester to go," she said. "Unreal. At times, it seems we just started!"

"Don't worry, Lissa," I chuckled, "there's plenty of school left! Four years, to be exact, and with NO Summer breaks!"

"That wasn't QUITE what I meant!" Clarissa exclaimed. "But it's true. Are you going to be OK for two weeks without us?"

"You're leaving me in Elizaveta's custody," I grinned. "I think she has me under control!"

"You do seem to have your act together," Jocelyn said, then grinned, "Finally!"

"Thanks to a concerted effort by the two of you, with help from others along the way. I just wish it could have been accomplished with a lot less pain all around."

"As Jane Fonda says in her workout videos, 'no pain, no gain'. And sadly, I think that's true, at least to a point."

"You suffered quite a bit for me to grow up," I replied. "I find it hard to believe it was worth it."

"We can't go back and change the past," Clarissa interjected. "Each and every event shaped us into the people we are today. Mike, are you happy?"

"Very."

"Jocelyn?"

She smiled, "Yes, I am, but...no, sorry, you asked 'happy', and the answer is 'yes'."

"And so am I," Clarissa replied. "We don't know what would have happened if we changed even one thing about the past. For all we know, in whatever alternate universe would have existed, we're all dead. Or estranged. Or whatever. But we could go on speculating forever about 'What if?' and become clinically depressed because we think we made some major mistake that altered the universe in a terrible way. Be happy that you're happy."

"The ends justify the means?" I asked.

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm not saying that those bad things were good by any stretch of the imagination, just that we're the sum-total of everything that happened to us so far. What's that phrase your grandfather uses, Mike?"

"'Life is suffering'. And yet, all three of us are happy."

"And we're still together, Mik," Jocelyn said. "Not quite as close as before, but we're working on it."

"True," I replied. "That doesn't make the mistakes easier to contemplate."

"What happened to 'no further care'?" she asked.

I smiled, "I don't know why I have to keep being reminded of that."

"You don't obsess, but every once in a while, you get into a mood."

"Sorry."

"Just work on it!" Jocelyn said. "But now, it's about time for me to head home. I'll see you on Thursday, Mik. And see you after break, Clarissa."

Clarissa and I both hugged Jocelyn, we wished her 'Merry Christmas', she picked up her bag, and left the room. Other friends filtered in to say 'goodbye' and 'Merry Christmas', and Clarissa left just after 1:00pm. By 4:30pm, when I left for my date with Elizaveta, there were only five kids, none of whom were part of our gang, still in the dorm. Michelle, the female RA, would also be staying until morning.

Elizaveta and I had our usual Chinese meal because it was the easiest way to follow the fast, and then we went to see *Johnny Dangerously*, one of the first

movies with the new 'PG-13' rating. We both found the movie absolutely hilarious, and I really enjoyed the send-up of old gangster movies. I'd seen quite a few of the old black-and-white movies over the years on the UHF station.

"Why was that PG-13 and not just PG?" Elizaveta asked.

"I'm guessing because they made some sex jokes," I replied. "I can't imagine the slapstick violence caused it, and all the swearing was done with humorous words like 'fargin icehole' and 'cork soaker'."

"It was funny, and I can't imagine anyone complaining about it if it was shown on TV."

"I think the derogatory word for blacks, or maybe the scene with the bomb when Jocko thought he had his «половой член» (*polovoj chlen*) in his hand." ("dick ['dork' in the movie]")

Elizaveta laughed, "True. That might upset some people. What are we going to do now?"

"I'm going to take you home! I'll come by the house tomorrow morning at 9:00am."

Elizaveta pouted but didn't argue. I drove her home, and after spending a few minutes talking with Viktor, I headed back to campus. With nothing else to do, I put on *Word of Mouth* by The Kinks, then opened *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, the fourth book in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* 'trilogy', and began reading where I'd left off earlier in the week.

The book was so-so, and I was mildly annoyed that computers were being portrayed positively, whereas, in the previous books, Adams had portrayed

them in a negative light. Arthur Dent even went so far as to buy an Apple computer to help him with star mapping. Kristin's grandfather had bought her one of the new Apple Macintosh computers over the Summer, and she was enamored with it. I still found them infernal.

The other thing that made the book so-so was that there was very little action in space, with most of it occurring on Earth, as well as the fact that there was a significant romantic component. That made it very different from the three previous books. And finally, the time-hopping didn't seem to flow very well. With about thirty pages to go, I decided if a fifth book in the 'trilogy' appeared, I'd skip it.

Kristin had recommended I read *Neuromancer* by a new author named William Gibson, but given that the main point was about computers and the main character was a computer hacker, I decided against it. The next book on my stack was actually a 'trilogy' of four books by Isaac Asimov.

I'd wanted to read his 'Foundation' series for some time and simply had never gotten around to it. I was looking forward to starting *Foundation* as soon as I finished *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*. I figured *Foundation*, *Foundation and Empire*, *Second Foundation*, and *Foundation's Edge* would carry me through to the end of the Spring semester.

I had just turned to the last page of the novel when I saw Michelle standing in my open door.

"Want some company?" she asked.

"I'm just finishing the last page of my book, and then I'm going to bed."

"That works, too," she said with an inviting smile.

I held my left hand to show my ring, "Not even close."

"Nobody's here and I'm sure not going to tell! Call it your last fling before you get married. You know, one night of wild, amazing, uninhibited sex?"

"I think you're missing the point," I replied.

"The point is to have fun! And I hear you're well-hung and really, really good!"

If she HAD heard that, I was singularly unhappy with whomever it was who was talking, but that was totally beside the point.

"Whatever you may have heard," I said, "it doesn't matter. For all intents and purposes, I AM married. The betrothal ceremony in the Orthodox Church is meant to be an unbreakable bond. In most cases, it's followed immediately by the crowning ceremony, which is what you would call the 'wedding', though it's more complicated than that. Besides, I gave my word, which, to me, is just as important."

"Who would know?"

God would know, but I wasn't going to open that potential can of worms, as I wasn't interested in a theological debate.

"Me!" I declared. "And fundamentally, that's all that matters. You're pretty, and I'm sure you'd be fun, but I gave my word to my fiancée, and ultimately, that's all that matters."

"You don't think monogamy is an outdated concept? I know you *dated* a bunch of girls on this floor."

The way she emphasized 'dated' made it clear she was using it as a euphemism for 'slept with', which, while true, was also beside the point.

"No, I don't think monogamy is outdated at all. As for dating, it's about finding the one person with whom you want to spend your life and with whom you want to create a family. Besides being a doctor, those are my two main goals in life."

"Doctors have access to unlimited nookie, and everyone knows they take advantage of it! It's expected! You fool around as much on the side as you can, then trade in your wife for a younger model when she gets too old! Tell me that's not what happens!"

"It may be what happens in some cases, but, frankly, it's immature behavior at best. Blaming it on stress or whatever is a cop-out. And before you give me the line about what wealthy, powerful men do, I know several who are faithful to their wives and have been for their entire lives."

"So they would have you believe."

"How many Russian women do you know?"

"Laura is Russian, right?"

I nodded, "She is. And I'm here to tell you, anyone who crosses a Russian woman in that way is going to die a slow, painful death. But the thing is, I agree with them. Cheating is about as low as it gets without committing a crime. And why the heck would you want a guy who cheats, either as a lover or a husband? Are you seriously standing there telling me you expect your husband to cheat on you? And that you'd be OK with that?"

"Pretty much all guys cheat."

"You have a VERY cynical view," I replied. "I know plenty of guys who would never cheat, including me. Granted, I'm aware of guys who have cheated, but that's between them and their girlfriends or wives, and it's not something I'm going to emulate. Honestly, your logic is lacking -- the fact that some guys cheat does not mean all guys cheat, or even a majority of guys cheat. It just means some do. And I'm not one of them. Which, at the moment, is all that matters. I guarantee if you want to get laid, you can find someone; it just won't be me."

She let out an exasperated sigh, turned, and left. I got up, shut and locked the door, then did my evening prayers. Once those were completed, I brushed my teeth, stripped off my clothes, and got into bed.



December 22, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I managed to leave the dorm without running into Michelle. I carried a bag with my bathroom kit and other sundries, a laundry bag with some dirty clothes, and a small, random selection of albums. I'd taken everything else I needed to Doctor Blahnik's during the week, and once I put everything in the trunk of my Mustang, I drove to the house, parked, and carried everything inside.

"Hi!" Milena called out when I walked in.

"Hi! What are you doing here so early?"

She followed me upstairs so I could drop my things in my room.

"Mom and I are finishing our Christmas shopping today. Got yours done?"

"During the week. When are you guys leaving?"

"In about ten minutes. What are you up to today?"

"I'm heading to Elizaveta's house. Not sure what the plans are, except for church tonight."

"I have an idea for your trip next Summer, if you're interested."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to my mom's villa in Spain. You guys could come join me on the beach for a few days. It's just north of Valencia, which is about three hours by train from Madrid, and you could continue on to Rome from there. We'll also have a car, so you could use that, too."

"Our schedule is pretty tight as it is," I replied.

"Can you extend it by a few days?"

"It would mean changing reservations in Rome, Athens, Vienna, Geneva, Munich, Copenhagen, and London."

"If you stayed with Joel and me near Valencia, you could still sightsee in Madrid. It would just mean taking the train there and back. And you could have a private room."

I chuckled, "That is tempting. Madrid was one of the places where the six of us would share a room."

"A pool, a beach, a private room, good company...what more can you ask for?"

"I'll talk to Clarissa and Sandy, but it makes sense to me. How long will you be there?"

"Two weeks. Unfortunately, that's all the vacation Joel gets. I'm not teaching this Summer, so I could stay longer if it were just me."

"I'll let you know after New Year's, but I can't imagine Clarissa or Sandy objecting. I'm going to get a shower now, if you don't mind."

Milena laughed, "I've seen it all, but I'll defer to proper decorum!"

"Thanks," I replied.

We exchanged a hug, she left, and I quickly showered. I dressed, and when I went back downstairs, Milena and her mom had already left. I locked up the house, got into my Mustang, and headed to Elizaveta's house, where I knew she'd have breakfast waiting for me. She did, and after a quick hug and kiss, she led me to the kitchen. I sat down, and she served me waffles.

"Milena suggested we stay at her mom's villa in Spain, near Valencia. We could visit Madrid by train, and that would let us have a private room for three nights when otherwise we would have had to share."

"Did you say 'yes'?"

"I told her we'd probably do that but that I needed to double-check with Clarissa and Sandy."

"So then we'd only have to share with the others in Amsterdam, Rome, Athens, and London, right?"

"Correct. The other hostels all have double rooms, and in Paris, we have the hotel. But remember, sometimes we'll be on the train overnight, and we're not booking sleeping berths."

"It's going to be fun, even if we can't...every night."

"Is that what you think marriage is?" I asked with a grin.

"That's what BOYS think it is!" she retorted.

"Assuming for the moment that's true, is that a problem?"

"No!" she replied mirthfully.

"And do you REALLY believe I think that's what marriage is?"

"I was teasing, and you know it!"

"So, you were being mean, which means..." I grinned.

"This didn't quite work out the way I wanted. Again!"

"I think you should get used to saying those words, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I replied. ("Kitten")

"You! Argh!"

"What? You can dish it out but not take it? You said those exact words to me!"

"I know!" Elizaveta exclaimed. "You are frustrating!"

"Good! It's going to be in the 40s today. What did you want to do?"

"How about we go to the mall? I STILL don't know what to get Gennady. Perhaps you can help me pick something out."

"I'll try my best," I replied. "Also, remember, tonight after Vespers, I need to talk to Mark and Alyssa and arrange their catechism. I won't be too long."

"I'll go home with my parents and help with dinner. Just come to the house when you're done. There's no Sunday School or lunch tomorrow, so Tasha asked if we could come over straight after church."

"That's fine with me."

"And then Friday, I'm having my friends over for lunch so you can meet them. A few of them will bring boyfriends. We're still having lunch with Jocelyn and Dale on Thursday, right?"

"Yes."

I finished my breakfast, and then Elizaveta and I headed out to my car. I gave her the keys and got into the passenger seat. I guided her through driving to the mall, and she did a very good, if a bit tentative, job of navigating the streets. She only stalled once at a traffic light on a slight hill.

"Very good," I said when we got out of the car at the busy shopping mall.

"I stalled once."

"But only once! You're doing just fine. We still need to take you on some more difficult roads, through the hills and so on, and on the freeway, but I want you to be comfortable with driving first."

I took Elizaveta's hand, and we walked into the mall. I'd already finished my shopping so I let her lead me to various stores and gave my opinion when asked. Eventually, she settled on a Cross pen and pencil set, which she had engraved with Gennady's name. I'd seen quite a few doctors and professors with them and felt it was a good choice. Her mission accomplished, we headed back to the house, with Elizaveta driving again.

We spent the day together and went to church for Vespers. As planned, after Vespers, Elizaveta went home with her parents, and I met with Mark and Alyssa to arrange catechism. We agreed on Thursday afternoons after the first of the year, after they got out of school. They'd meet me at Doctor Blahnik's house, which was convenient for all three of us. Father Nicholas blessed their icons, I gave them prayer books, and Father assigned their basic prayer rule. All of that accomplished, we all left the church, and I headed to Elizaveta's house for dinner.

XXXVII. Nativity, 1984

December 24, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday, which was Christmas Eve, I slept in, ate a light breakfast, then made some tea and went to sit in the music room to start reading *Foundation*. I read for about fifteen minutes before Doctor Blahnik came into the room.

"What time are you leaving?" she asked.

"About 11:00am."

"And you'll be back tonight?"

"Around 9:30pm, most likely. We'll go to Vespers, then have a light meal."

"Will you join Milena, Joel, Derek, and me to decorate the tree? I know you can't join us for dinner."

"I'd love to. I wondered why the tree was bare!"

"Traditionally in Czechoslovakia, it's decorated on Christmas Eve. Would you be able to bring Elizaveta with you?"

"I think so. I'll speak with Viktor about bringing her home afterwards. It technically violates her curfew, but given we'll be here, I'm sure he'll give his blessing."

"Wonderful. Is there anything I can do for you? Any help you need?"

"You've already done so much for me; I can't imagine what that might be!"

Doctor Blahnik smiled, "We did miss the chance to have that glass of wine together because you went and got yourself engaged much sooner than expected!"

"There was also the whole problem of me being a student."

"A problem which would no longer exist after May! But that is all out of the question now, given your strict understanding of fidelity."

"I don't think my understanding matters at this point," I replied with a silly smile. "What matters is Elizaveta's understanding!"

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "Self-preservation is VERY motivating!"

"Especially when we're talking about a Russian woman! But I also want to be a man of my word."

"As you should. I'll leave you to your book, then."

"Thanks."

I read for about an hour before Milena and Joel arrived, then spent time with them before heading to Elizaveta's house. As usual, she greeted me with a tight hug and a relatively chaste kiss as we were under the watchful eye of my soon-to-be grandmother-in-law, Yekaterina. That didn't stop the thoughts which the feel of Elizaveta's young, firm body against mine caused, but it certainly ensured that we didn't act on those feelings.

"Lunch will be ready soon," Elizaveta said as she led me to the living room where her brothers were sitting. "This is my brother, Iosif. Iosif, this is Mike."

I shook hands with her very good-looking, dark-haired, deeply tanned brother. I could only imagine the rampage he was on was something akin to the one Dale had engaged in during his first semester. Iosif, on the other hand, was a Sophomore and still appeared to be 'doing college right', as Dale had put it. He had a firm, strong grip when we shook hands.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "How is California?"

"Sunny, blonde, and very warm!" he grinned.

I chuckled as Elizaveta and I sat down on the loveseat.

"I hear you've been suckered into the black-robe gang," he said.

"Joe!" Elizaveta protested.

"It's OK, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I soothed. "First of all, we Orthodox know that good guys wear black! Second, I wasn't suckered into anything. I fully understand what I'm doing and what's required of me because I agreed to accept ordination of my own free will." ("Kitten")

"I don't get why anyone would sign up for that."

"Joe, mind your own business!" Elizaveta said sharply.

"Kitty has claws!" Joe teased.

"Joe, enough," Gennady said. "We know you've abandoned the Church, but there's no need to denigrate our faith."

"Fantasies and fairy tales," Iosif said, shaking his head. "All used to control people. They pull the string, and you move; they play the tune, and you dance."

Elizaveta was about to respond, but I put my hand on her forearm.

"That's entirely possible," I replied.

"What?!" Elizaveta gasped in horror.

"Faith, little sister," Gennady replied with a smile. "Mike has FAITH that it's true. In the face of the possibility that it is not, he still believes."

"But..." she protested.

"Do you remember the story of Thomas, don't you, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)?" I asked softly. ("Kitten")

"Yes, of course. You have doubts?"

"At times, yes. But I persevere."

"Which is the entire point," Gennady said. "Don't ask for additional challenges, Liza; life brings too many of them as it is. And the world provides plenty of opportunity to fall without inviting doubt into your mind."

"Lunch is ready!" Mrs. Kozlova announced from the doorway to the living room.

We went to the dining room and had a fasting-compatible lunch of homemade vegetarian vegetable soup. When we finished eating, I spoke with Viktor about taking Elizaveta to Doctor Blahnik's house and received his blessing. That accomplished, Elizaveta and I donned our Winter gear and went out for a walk in the light snow that was falling, guaranteeing a 'white Christmas'.

"Why didn't you tell me about doubting?" Elizaveta asked as we walked down the driveway.

"Because it's more about doubting myself than anything."

"About?"

"My worthiness to be a deacon."

"But what matters there is that others see you as worthy, right?"

"That is basically what Father Nicholas and the bishop have said, but it doesn't make it any easier."

"And I'll be by your side the entire way, Mike. It's a shared ministry. I believe you can do it, and I'll be there with you."

I squeezed her hand, "I know. And I'll need your support just as much for my secular calling as well. Both are going to put a severe strain on us individually and on our relationship. It's going to be difficult."

"That is what Maria told me, as did Matushka Anastasia; but I want this, Mike. I want to be with you, and be your wife."

"And I want you to be my wife."

"We're out of sight of the house," Elizaveta said impishly, "could I have a kiss like a wife?"

"In about five months, I'll kiss you EVERYWHERE!" I teased.

"Don't be mean!" Elizaveta protested.

I took her in my arms, and we exchanged a soft, loving, deeply sexy French kiss. She moaned softly and pressed against me, though our heavy Winter coats prevented us from close contact. We held the kiss and hug for a minute, then resumed walking hand-in-hand.

"The snow is beautiful," Elizaveta said. "I really like how peaceful and quiet it is."

"Me, too," I replied.

"Do you have any specific things you want in the house? I mean both decor and anything else."

"Not really, so long as there is a quiet place to study."

"The second, smaller room, at least until we have children. And that's at least two years before we start trying, right? After LOTS of practice!"

I chuckled, "Yes, once you graduate from High School. The babies, I mean, not the practice."

"I'm going to change the curtains, the cover on the couch, and do some painting. Most of the things we need for the house will come from our wedding gifts -- my grandmothers are coördinating with the ladies from the church."

"When do they plan to send out invitations?"

"In February. That gives everyone three months to make plans if they need to. Besides your grandparents coming from Chicago and your godparents coming from New York, does anyone have to travel?"

"Dale," I replied. "His exams are the following week, so he's flying down on Friday and has to fly back on Sunday."

"Won't that affect his grades?"

"He already has a job lined up with Boeing in Seattle, so unless he fails to graduate, it's not all that important. For me, if I were to blow my grades, I could lose my place in medical school."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. Everything is 'pending graduation and final transcripts'. But I don't foresee any difficulties of any kind. And you know how much I study. That won't change. You and I will still have our Friday dates, and I'll have lunch at the house on Saturdays, and we'll spend Sundays with Tasha and Nik."

"How much are you going to study with your friends once you start medical school?"

"A lot, obviously, but I'm not sure what that means in terms of actual hours just yet. We'll figure it out once we figure out the optimal study group size."

"You should come home for dinner every day."

"I agree with you on that. Let's wait until August to worry about things in that level of detail, please. But I will include you in any decisions."

Elizaveta squeezed my hand, and we continued walking in silence, returning to the house about twenty minutes after we'd left. After we'd taken off our Winter gear, Viktor asked me to join him in his study. He had his wife bring us hot chocolate, then shut the door.

"I heard from my attorney," he said. "It turns out, that in Ohio, you only need permission from me and Yulia."

"Then what happened with Sasha Antanova? I mean, if you know."

"I do. My attorney spoke to Deacon Vasily's attorney. That was about Yaroslav adopting Viktoriya Alexandra. It only became about the marriage because Family Services filed an objection, which they could do because the case was before a judge. But, so long as you and Elizaveta simply proceed with our permission, which we give by signing the marriage license application and having it notarized, Family Services can't normally intervene."

"Normally?"

"I don't know the details; that's just what the attorney said. His opinion is that there are no impediments, and the legislation is clear."

"That's good news!"

"We'll apply for the marriage license the first week in May."

"Good."

"Also, Gennady said that Iosif was being irreverent. I apologize for that."

"There's no need," I replied. "He spoke his mind, and I wasn't offended. My Uncle Aleksey often says things like that, and it doesn't bother me, either. My grandfather, on the other hand..."

"I think your upcoming ordination will ameliorate some of those hard feelings towards your uncle."

"It will make my grandfather happy and give him peace, but it won't solve the problem between them. But that's a minor issue, really; Uncle Aleksey will be at the wedding along with his family."

"Do you get along with your cousins?"

"I don't really see them all that often -- just at family gatherings. Once my uncle and his family moved away, they didn't come around all that often because so much revolved around church. I think it's the same with Iosif, right?"

Viktor nodded, "Sadly. I've given up asking him to join us for Vespers and Liturgy when he's home, as it only leads to more hard feelings."

"I think my grandfather and uncle have proved that to be the case as well. I talked to my mom about it when I was younger, and she couldn't point to anything that caused the problem. It was just Uncle Aleksey deciding to go a different path. And you know my sister has done the same thing."

"But she'll at least come to church if you ask."

"True. Will Iosif not come to the wedding?" I asked.

"Classes don't end for them until the first week in June. The same is true for Gennady, but he's going to fly home. He's made arrangements with his advisor. Of course, it's a two-hour flight for him from Boston, while it's more than four hours from Los Angeles for Iosif, plus the time change. I've encouraged him to come back, but I don't think he will."

"Is that going to be a problem for Elizaveta?" I asked.

"No. She never expected him to come home. We weren't even sure he was going to come home for Christmas. I don't have all the details, but I believe he was planning on going home with a girl, but they broke up a few weeks ago."

"I thought he was playing the field," I replied.

"Oh, he is. I didn't say she was his ONLY girlfriend!" Viktor said, shaking his head.

"What's his major?" I asked.

"Formally undeclared, though it will be some kind of engineering. He has to decide next semester."

"He's a Sophomore now, right?"

"Yes."

"Maybe that will help him buckle down."

Viktor sighed, "I wouldn't count on it."

"Gennady is coming to work for you when he graduates; what's he going to do?"

"Start at the bottom and work his way up!" Viktor laughed. "He'll actually work in several of the businesses to get a good feeling for how they operate."

"When do you plan to retire?"

"About ten years, I think. But it'll mostly be reducing what I do and giving more responsibility to Gennady. At one point, I assumed my son-in-law might be involved in some way, but obviously, that's not going to be the case. And, to

answer the question I suspect is forming in your mind, Iosif never expressed any interest in being involved."

"As my sister Liz has said to me many times, we have to live our lives the way we think best, even if it doesn't make sense to other people."

"I suspect Iosif agrees with her. Anyway, I'll let you return to Elizaveta now."

I left his study and found Elizaveta in the living room with her brothers. We spent the afternoon talking, and everyone except Iosif went to Vespers. After Vespers, we had our last fasting meal of the Nativity season, and then Elizaveta and I went to Doctor Blahnik's house to participate in the Czechoslovakian tradition of decorating the tree on Christmas Eve.

"We're cheating a bit," Doctor Blahnik said. "The strings of candy are store-bought rather than homemade. My mother used to do everything from scratch -- make the sweets, wrap them, string them, and so on. It's a huge amount of work!"

"That sounds similar to Jocelyn's family tradition -- strings of popcorn and candy canes."

"The lights go on first," Doctor Blahnik said. "Derek, if you and Mike would do that, Joel can tie the strings on the apple stems."

"Apples?" I asked.

"In place of large globe ornaments," Milena said. "Another Czech tradition. Do you follow American traditions?"

"Yes," I replied. "Tasha's family does a very Russian Christmas, but ours was pretty much typically American. The only thing my grandparents really passed on was the language. Elizaveta's family is similar to ours."

"Elizaveta, do you speak Russian at home?" Joel asked.

"When we were little, my grandparents spoke Russian to us, but that was about it. My Russian is about as good as Mike's."

"Will you teach your kids Russian?"

"We haven't talked about it in any detail," Elizaveta replied, "but I doubt it. Mike and I are both basically Americans and prefer that, albeit with an Orthodox take. Tasha and Nik, on the other hand, will have a very Russian household, in addition to being Orthodox."

"Even Tasha won't take it as far as her dad did," I added. "When we were discussing a possible way forward, Tasha and I had talked about teaching our kids Russian, but beyond that, it was mostly about keeping certain Russian traditions she valued. But with few exceptions, neither Elizaveta's parents nor mine tried to hang onto the Old Country ways."

"That sounds like Mom," Milena said. "A few traditions, like Christmas and Easter, but otherwise, mostly we're American."

Milena put on a CD with Christmas music, and we set about decorating the tree. It took nearly an hour, and when we finished, I drove Elizaveta home and then returned to Doctor Blahnik's house. I found Milena waiting for me in the living room. She invited me to have some tea, so I sat down with her.

"Where's Joel?" I asked.

"In the guest room," she replied.

"I feel bad about sleeping upstairs."

"We're guests!" she replied. "Besides, the bed in the guest room is just fine, and the bathroom is the same as mine. Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Are you absolutely positive you're doing the right thing?"

"You're talking about Elizaveta?"

"Yes."

"You're worried because you married your soulmate, and I'm going into what amounts to an arranged marriage? You know I can't marry my soulmate and why. And you know why I'm marrying in May."

"All of which is logical, but is it the right thing for you to do?"

I had a thought, which was probably silly, but I decided to voice it.

"If you tell me your mom put you up to this..." I grinned.

Milena laughed, "No, but we talked. And while that might be a disappointment, she's not foolish enough to think interfering in your plans is a smart thing to do. We both have the same concern about what amounts to rushing into something. That's especially true given Elizaveta's age."

"You're the LAST person I would suspect who would raise the age issue," I countered.

Milena laughed softly, "I wasn't talking about fucking; I was talking about marriage! Two very different things."

"And I wasn't talking about sex, either. You think she's too young to marry?"

"I think only she can make that decision, but I'd certainly counsel caution. And that's all I'm asking -- are you sure she's the one you want to spend your life with, and are you sure you need to decide now?"

"You know my take on betrothal, so it's a bit late to ask those questions. And they were asked by me and others. I could have told the bishop, 'Not yet!'"

Milena smiled and shook her head, "No, you couldn't have. Not because anyone is compelling you but because it's what your faith tells you to do. That's not a bad thing, so long as it's tempered with some common sense."

"And you think I'm not acting with common sense?"

"I've never known you to not think things through, though you often overthink them."

I smiled, "You and Deb?"

Milena smiled, "I may have changed my opinion about your approach to that, given the eventual outcome. But remember, even logic needs to give way to doing what's best for you. You're a romantic at heart, just as I am. But you also have to acknowledge reality at times."

"And yet, you and Joel got back together."

"That was reality!"

I shook my head, "No. That was your romantic nature overcoming your reality. If you recall, I had to push you to ignore what had happened and try to recover what you had."

"And weirdly, only you could have helped me do that because of your unique personality."

"What are you trying to say?" I asked.

"I guess I'm not sure. If you were any other guy, I'd say that there is an endless supply of sixteen-year-old nookie available for smart, good-looking, well-hung medical students. But I'm positive you aren't getting married because it's the only way to get laid."

"I'm getting married because it's what I want to do, what I need to do, and what I'm required to do. And Elizaveta has all the qualities I believe are important to be a good wife."

"And your romantic side?"

"I can't marry my first love or my soulmate. Nor the girl I lusted after from the time she turned fourteen. Mainly, none of them can walk the path I've chosen to walk. Tasha couldn't, and neither could Lara, and they're cradle Orthodox! To be honest, finding a better match is unlikely."

"What about love?"

"It will come. We're working on it every day. Given we're already on the same page with faith, family, and career, I'd say we have a very good start. And, finally, I'm very happy with how things are."

"Ultimately, that's what matters. I care about you, and I want to be sure you're not making a big mistake."

"I don't think so, or I wouldn't be pursuing this course of action."

"If you want to talk, I'm here for you."

"Thanks."

We hugged, she went to the guest room, and I went upstairs to go to bed.



Nativity, December 25, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday morning, which was the Feast of the Nativity, I rose early, showered, dressed, and headed to Elizaveta's house so I could take her with me to church. Because the Nativity Fast didn't technically end until we received the Eucharist, our gift exchange would occur immediately after the Divine Liturgy of the Nativity. Father Nicholas scheduled Matins for 7:00am rather than 8:30am, which meant we were out of church at 10:30am, and then we headed back to Elizaveta's house.

"What's the usual order of events?" I asked Elizaveta once we left the church parking lot.

"Our usual way is to exchange presents in our immediate family, then we eat a large family meal around 2:00pm, but we'll do that at noon instead so we can get to your grandparents' house."

"You know, I never asked about your aunts and uncles."

"My mom's sister lives in California, and I have two cousins who are seventeen and fifteen. My dad's sister lives in Toronto, and I have a cousin who is nineteen. I think they'll all come for the wedding, but I'm not sure."

"Which explains why both sets of grandparents are here regularly."

"Where does your mom's brother live?" she asked.

"St. Louis. My dad's siblings all live in the Chicago suburbs near my other grandparents."

"Do you see them very often?"

"My Uncle Aleksey and his family visit every Christmas and occasionally other times. My dad's family doesn't visit very often. I told you how they feel about his conversion to Orthodoxy. They will be at the wedding, though."

"Your grandparents really don't see you because of church?"

"It took them a long time before they'd even speak to my dad."

"I think I see why he is the way he is with Paul -- that's how he was taught to behave. But your mom taught you to love everyone, no matter what."

"That's a very astute observation," I replied. "I hadn't really thought of it in those terms."

"I think that's the most important trait for a doctor or a member of the clergy -- you have to love everyone. If you don't, you'll do a terrible job. And you show it with the way you care for your friends."

"And you," I replied.

"Yes, of course, husband!" she replied mirthfully. "You've shown that by agreeing with everything I say!"

"So that's how it's going to be, is it?" I asked with a grin as I turned into the driveway at her house.

"Yes!" she continued with the same mirthful tone. "So long as you do as I say, everything will be fine! Husband, love me! Husband, kiss me! Husband..."

"Make love to me?" I asked with a silly smirk.

"Perhaps," she replied impishly. "But you know I'm teasing!"

"About making love?" I asked.

"No, silly! About doing everything I say! Obviously, we'll talk about things."

"And so long as I always agree with you, everything will be wonderful?"

"Do you really think we'll disagree on anything important?"

"It's possible, but it's not the disagreement that's important; it's how you handle the disagreement. I'm sure your parents disagree from time to time."

"I believe my dad just does what my mom says," she replied with a smirk.

"And does your DAD believe that?"

She laughed softly, "Probably not! But I honestly can't recall them ever fighting or having trouble like your parents over Liz and Paul."

"I think the circumstances that led to that are much more severe than, say, Iosif concentrating on girls and beer rather than his studies."

"Joe is a good brother," Elizaveta said. "But I think my parents pushed him too hard to go to college. I think he went because they insisted, not because he wanted to go. Geno wanted to go to college and follow in my dad's footsteps."

"And you?"

"To be a wife and mom, just like my mom and grandmothers. To run my household, raise my children, care for my husband, and make love all the time!"

I chuckled, "You seem to have a one-track mind!"

"And is that a problem?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Not at all!" I responded quickly.

"I dream about what it will be like," she sighed wistfully. "I wish we didn't have to wait five months!"

"Well, first of all, I promised Father Nicholas 'no slip-ups'. Second, before your birthday, it would be illegal. And we can't marry before your birthday."

"May I say that it's not fair?"

"You may," I replied. "But that won't change anything."

"You want to marry. I want to marry. My parents want us to marry. Father Nicholas and the bishop approve. That's all that should matter!"

"The government gets their say as well," I replied. "And they're the ones with police and courts and jails."

"But is this their business?"

We got out of my Mustang and headed for the front door.

"I think you're just a bit frustrated, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I replied. ("Kitten")

She stopped at the front door, turned, and held out her arms for a hug, and we exchanged a soft French kiss. After a minute, we broke the kiss, and she put her head on my chest, and I held her to me. The door opened to reveal an amused Gennady.

"Is this where I say 'get a room'?" he asked.

"Don't give her any ideas!" I teased.

"Mike!" Elizaveta growled. "Do NOT encourage him!"

"Well, come into the house," he said. "We'll be ready for gifts in a few minutes."

Elizaveta made a point of giving me a VERY sexy kiss, then turned, made a face at her brother, and we went into the house. We took off our coats, hats, and gloves and joined the rest of the family in the living room to exchange gifts. My gift to Elizaveta was a necklace and earring set, and hers to me was a black fedora.

"I think it will look very distinguished when you have to wear a suit," she said.

"Or your cassock."

"A Cincinnati Reds cap isn't appropriate?" I asked, referring to my usual headgear.

"Perhaps not," she replied. "You need just a bit of fashion sense!"

"And so it begins," Iosif teased.

Elizaveta rolled her eyes, and the rest of the family laughed a bit, but not too much. The gift exchange continued, and I received a very nice garment bag which was intended for me to use for transporting my vestments. The rest of the gifts were exchanged, and then we had tea while Elizaveta's grandmothers and mom put the finishing touches on our meal. When it was ready, we all went to the table to eat, and after stuffing ourselves with rich foods which we'd avoided during the fast, Elizaveta and I excused ourselves so we could head to my grandfather's house in Rutherford.



Nativity, December 25, 1984, Rutherford, Ohio

"How the hell did someone as intelligent as you are, fall for Dad's bullshit?" my uncle asked, instead of a greeting.

"«Алексей! Достаточно!» (*Aleksey! Dostatochno!*)" my grandmother exclaimed in reproof. ("Aleksey! That's enough!")

I smiled, "It's OK. Uncle Alex is entitled to his opinion."

"But he is NOT entitled to use that language!" my grandmother declared. "I do not want to hear you speak that way in my house, Aleksey!"

"Yes, Mom," he replied flatly.

"Dear, let it go," my Aunt Natalie said to her husband. "There's no point in starting up that old argument. Let's just enjoy Christmas!"

After introductions, we moved further into the house, and I got drinks for Elizaveta and myself.

"Your uncle and my brother should get together," she said quietly.

"Because they aren't troublemakers enough by themselves?" I asked.

"What does your uncle do?"

"He works in logistics for TWA. Something to do with cargo, but I'm not actually sure."

"And your aunt?"

"She's a receptionist for an accounting firm, though I don't remember which one."

"And your cousins?"

"High School -- Diane is a Senior, and Jack is a Freshman."

We took our drinks and went to sit with Liz and Paul.

"How are things?" I asked.

"Your dad is polite, which is a huge step up from before," Paul said. "But he hasn't really spoken to me other than to say 'hello'. I expected him to at least make the same threat you did."

"Actually, all I did was extract a promise from you that I expect you to keep."

Paul nodded, "And I gave you my word."

"Then there's nothing to worry about. How are things otherwise?"

"Work is good, and I'm having no trouble at all with my PO."

"PO?" Elizaveta asked.

"Parole Officer."

"How's school, Liz?" I asked.

"Good. We can cover tuition and books next semester."

"Cool. And work?"

"Just fine. And Mom and I are getting along better."

"That's good news."

We chatted with my sister and Paul for a bit, then went to talk to my grandparents and parents, and then with my cousins. Dinner was excellent, and happily, there were no problems over Paul being there, and my uncle didn't try to cause any trouble, either. After dinner, the men celebrated with a shot of vodka, which I shared, though when seconds and thirds were offered, I declined. About an hour later, Elizaveta and I excused ourselves so that we could head back to McKinley and spend some time together at Doctor Blahnik's house before I took Elizaveta home.



December 26, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

There was too much snow on the sidewalk on Boxing Day for me to run, and the gym at Taft was closed, so I simply did some pushups and sit-ups, then showered and joined Doctor Blahnik and Derek for breakfast.

"What's your plan for today, Mike?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

"I'm going to the courthouse to hear the sentencing for the guys who beat up Robby and Lee. They took a plea bargain, but it's ultimately up to the judge to decide the sentence."

"Do you know what the prosecutor recommended?"

"According to Robby, probation for the two 'followers' and thirty days for the ringleader. They could have got anywhere from six months to a year because Lee was injured."

"That seems a bit light, given they beat them up simply because they're gay," Derek said.

"Robby and Lee both agreed with the prosecutor's recommendations," I replied. "Honestly, the root cause of this is the pastor and other leadership at their church."

"Your church thinks homosexuality is a sin, right?" Derek asked.

"It thinks sex outside of the bonds of marriage is a sin. Desire, in and of itself, isn't sinful. Robby and Lee have both been to my church several times, and I've spoken to my priest and bishop about it. We're called to love everyone, not beat them up! And from a secular standpoint, they ought to be treated fairly and given the same opportunities as everyone else."

"Does that include marriage?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

I shrugged, "That's not up to me. Certainly, my church wouldn't sanctify homosexual marriages, and I can't imagine anyone trying to force us to do so. Ultimately, it's a political decision, and I try to stay out of that kind of thing as much as possible."

"Didn't your bishops march with Doctor Martin Luther King?" she asked.

"Yes, and as far as I'm aware, our bishops are for equal civil rights for all. But marriage is a sacrament, and so their opinion on that has to be consistent with the teachings of the church."

"What are you doing after court?"

"Spending the day with Elizaveta. We planned to come back here, if that's OK with you."

"Of course! We're going out, so you'll have the house to yourself until dinner. Join us?"

"We'd love to," I replied.

I finished breakfast, then put on slacks and a dress shirt, considered and rejected putting on a tie, put on my Winter coat and new fedora, then headed to the courthouse. When I got inside, I found a bulletin board with a printed list of cases and found the three cases were being heard in courtroom 203. I climbed the stairs, found the correct door, and went inside. There were several others in the spectator area, but I didn't recognize any of them. A few minutes later, three young men, each with their own lawyer, as well as men and women I assumed were their parents, came into the courtroom, followed by others who I suspected were part of the congregation.

About ten minutes later, a court reporter and a clerk came into the courtroom, and two minutes after that, the bailiff called for everyone to stand, and the judge came into the courtroom. He took his seat at the bench and asked everyone to be seated. Four cases were called and resolved before the ones in which I was interested were called.

The first of those was James Bush, the one who led the attack. As expected, the judge ordered 30 days in the county jail and added a \$500 fine, court costs, \$500 restitution, and six months' probation. The second and third attackers, Matthew Andrews and Mark Carlton, were each sentenced to six months' probation, a \$500 fine, court costs, and \$250 in restitution. If they actually paid, Lee would come out ahead after his co-pay and deductible. Well, minus having to wear a cast and be in pain.

James Bush was handcuffed and led away, and having seen what I wanted to see, I got up and left the courtroom. As I was walking down the stairs, I heard footsteps behind me, and then my name was called out. I turned to see who it was and saw a guy about my age.

"The faggots sent you because they were afraid to show up?" he asked.

I shook my head at the slur, then turned and, without a word, continued walking down the stairs. I made it to my car before I heard another voice, this one older, and I turned to see a man in a suit and tie.

"Happy?" he asked.

"No. The only way for me to be happy would be for those young men not to have attacked my friends. That said, the government has decided that what happened today was justice for those young men beating up my friends. WHY they did it is irrelevant."

"You support deviants!"

"I love my neighbor, which is the second greatest commandment Jesus gave us."

"Faggots are not my neighbor!"

"I suggest you read the parable of the 'Good Samaritan'," I said, and unlocked the door to my car.

"And I suggest you read about Sodom and Gomorrah!"

"Which was about inhospitality," I replied. "Whoever taught you did as poor a job as whoever taught Tim Saddler."

"Works righteousness is a lie from the pit of hell!"

"Jesus taught it," I said, getting into my car. "As I told Tim Saddler, the only difference between the sheep and the goats, according to the Scriptures, is what they did and didn't do. I suggest you read your Bible but for effect this time."

I pulled the door to the car shut without waiting for an answer because I knew he wouldn't be able to hear me. He started yelling as I started the engine, but I couldn't hear what he was saying because the radio came on. I didn't turn it down because I didn't want to hear what he was saying. I pulled out of the spot which I'd backed into, as was my norm, and left the parking lot to head to Elizaveta's house so I could bring her back to Doctor Blahnik's house.

"You really just walked away?" Elizaveta asked when I told her what had happened.

"Drove," I replied with a grin.

"You walked first, *then* drove!"

"Yes, «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*)," I deadpanned. "I walked to my car, then drove away."
("Bunny Rabbit")

"Do you know who the man was?"

"I'm not sure. He came in with the three guys, and I do remember seeing him at the debate, but I don't know more than that. And, while I'm not excusing him, there are Russian Orthodox who have the same views."

"Tasha told me that there was a significant conflict with you and her godparents because of your friends."

"There was. Fortunately, your godparents didn't hold the same opinion. It's wrong to hate someone or treat them badly just because they're different. And you've met Robby, Lee, and Clarissa, and they're just like us, with that one exception. And you know that I've committed the sin of fornication, so I'm the last person to throw stones."

"That was Jesus' challenge, right?"

"Yes, to the self-righteous. The professor I had for Latin and World Religion is a Roman Catholic priest, and he told a joke about that."

"A joke? About the Bible and Jesus?"

"Actually, about Mary. It goes like this -- Jesus tells the men that he who is without sin should cast the first stone. A rock goes whizzing by his ear and hits the woman caught in adultery smack in the forehead. Jesus turns around and says -- 'Mom! Cut that out! I was trying to make a point!'"

Elizaveta laughed, then quickly got control of herself.

"I shouldn't laugh!"

"Why? It's funny!"

"But it's blasphemous!"

"Is it? We do teach that the *Theotokos* was without sin, so..."

"Yes, I know."

"But you know what the real problem with that entire scenario is?"

"What?"

"If the woman was 'caught in adultery', why was the crowd only going to stone her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think about what it says."

She was quiet for a moment, then gasped, "Where was the man?!"

"Exactly. The real point was hypocrisy, and Jesus was challenging the men, effectively accusing THEM of committing the same offense, not just a sin in general."

"Wow!"

"That was a lesson the bishop taught at Holy Transfiguration about ten years ago."

"Mike, do you think this might cause trouble for the new catechumens?"

I nodded, "I'm afraid it might."

XXXVIII. Stumbling Down the Path

December 27, 1984, Rutherford and McKinley, Ohio

"Marie, this is my friend Dale Melrose. Dale, this is my friend Marie De Santis."

I could tell by the look on Dale's face he was VERY attracted to Marie, and knowing Marie, she'd be more than happy to entertain him, if that's what he wanted.

"Dale," Jocelyn said, "this is my boyfriend, Bill Ebersole. Bill, Dale."

They shook hands, and I suppressed a chuckle at the thought that Dale didn't look at Bill the same way he had at Marie. We walked into the restaurant and were greeted by Liz.

"Table for six?" she asked.

"Yes, please," I replied.

"I didn't know you worked here," Dale said to Liz.

"I started right after graduation. I'm going to Rutherford Junior College. You heard I got married earlier this month, right?"

"Mike told me. Congratulations! Where does your husband work?"

"He's the night manager at the motel across the street."

Liz led us to the large semi-circular booth, which would comfortably seat eight, which meant we had plenty of room. Despite that, Elizaveta sat very close to me, and I noticed Marie did the same with Dale, though Bill and Jocelyn kept a more typical distance between them.

"What's your major, Marie?" Dale asked.

"English Lit, with a Secondary Education certification. I'm student teaching next semester."

"Is that a five-year program?" he asked.

"Yes, but I'm finishing in four because I went to Summer school my first two Summers at Taft."

"Where do you want to teach?"

Marie laughed, "My old High School in Mason. It'll totally be worth it to see the looks on the faces of some of my teachers who thought I was a 'party girl!'"

"You ARE a party girl!" I chuckled.

"True! But they meant that I'd accomplish nothing in my life."

"Dale seems to have done OK for a 'goody-two-shoes' who turned into a 'party boy'," Jocelyn teased.

"Hey, at least I know how to do college the RIGHT way!" he protested.

Marie laughed, "I told Mike a bunch of times he wasn't doing college right!"

"Me, too!" Dale agreed.

"Why do you think you have to behave badly to go to college?" Elizaveta asked.

"Because college is the last time you can really just do whatever you want," Marie said. "I mean, so long as you go to class and keep your grades up. Once you graduate, there will be work and bills and family considerations. So you should have your fun, then be ready to settle down once you graduate."

"That just makes no sense to me!" Elizaveta protested.

"Me either," Jocelyn said. "But it is a pretty common attitude. I saw lots of kids like that at Purdue. Most of them get it out of their system by the end of their Freshman year. Dale did, at UW-Madison."

"I'd make the same 'makes no sense' argument about being engaged at fifteen," Marie said.

"Let's not start an argument, please," Bill counseled.

"It's OK," Elizaveta said confidently. "I'm absolutely sure I'm doing the right thing."

"Did you even have a boyfriend before Mike?" Marie asked.

"No. But so what? This is exactly what I want, and I see no point in waiting."

"But you haven't really experienced life!"

"Again, so? And what experience do you mean? Sex? I see no good argument for having sex with anyone except my husband. Partying? I don't see the point."

"What about college?" Marie asked.

"I don't need college to be fulfilled," Elizaveta said firmly. "I have all the training I need to be a wife and mother, and those, together with being a Deacon's wife, are more than a full-time job! And Mike will earn enough as a doctor so that I won't need to work. That is what I want. I approached Mike, not the other way around! Maybe that doesn't work for you, but it is exactly what I want!"

"And you're sure, at fifteen, that you know?"

"Mike knew he wanted to be a doctor at ten," Jocelyn said. "And I knew I wanted to be a lawyer from around age thirteen."

"But those aren't permanent," Marie protested.

"On the contrary," I interjected. "To be a doctor, you basically commit to an additional twelve years of education following High School, and then that's what you are. Could you change? I suppose, but given the cost in time and effort, and the stress and other things you give up, it's about as close to a lifetime commitment as anything I can think of short of marriage or being ordained."

"And you're doing all three!" Dale declared. "I think it's nuts, but they both have a point about the commitment they're making. And so does Jocelyn."

"You don't think fifteen is too young to decide to get married?" Marie asked.

"Hang on!" Elizaveta interrupted. "The only person who gets to decide that is ME! Why should you, or anyone else, decide when I should marry? I asked Mike, and my parents, priest, and bishop have all given their blessing! Who are YOU to say I shouldn't!"

"Careful," Jocelyn warned Marie, "she's a Russian woman..."

"That's right!" Elizaveta declared. "I am a woman! And it's my right to decide who and when I marry!"

"I think we should change topics," Bill suggested.

"I agree," Dale said.

"Are you going to be able to come home between graduation and starting work at Boeing?" I asked.

Before he could answer, the waitress came to take our orders. Once she had them, the conversation continued.

"Not really," he said. "I'll pack up all my stuff and ship it to Seattle, but I need to find a place to live, get moved in, and all the other stuff. I start work on June 18th. I will be here for the wedding, but it's going to be 'zip in, zip out'. And besides, you'll be gone, won't you?"

"That's true," I replied. "We'll be in Europe with Sandy, Jason, Clarissa, and Abby from June 8th to July 21st."

"Is that your honeymoon?" Dale asked.

"We're going to Niagara Falls for a few days after the wedding. And then we have four days in Paris at a very nice hotel courtesy of my friend Laura, and we're staying a few days at my professor's villa in Spain. Otherwise, we'll be in hostels."

"What will you do at Boeing, Dale?" Bill asked.

"Same as I have been for my Internship -- working in the Program Office for the 767. I'll be assigned some specific task in that office, but as yet, I don't know what

that will be. In my three internships, I've done parts logistics, maintenance standards, and aircraft delivery. What about you?"

"I'm finishing up a political science degree, and I'll start on a Master's in Foreign Relations at OSU in the Fall."

"What's your plan after that?"

"I'm not sure. I could work for the government either as an analyst or in the diplomatic corps, teach, or work for a global consulting firm as an analyst. I have two years to figure it out."

I wondered about that because I knew Jocelyn wanted to stay in the general area, and except for teaching, I suspected Bill's jobs would take him overseas or to DC or to one of the bigger cities like New York or Chicago. But Jocelyn hadn't said he was 'Mr. Right', and it was entirely possible they hadn't slept together, based on our conversation when she'd asked my opinion.

"Jos, which law schools will you apply to?" Dale asked.

"UC and Ohio State. I'll also apply to Kent State and Case Western for security. I figure four is the right number of schools to apply to so that I ensure I get in someplace."

"You plan to practice around here, right?"

"That's the plan. We'll see where life leads me."

"Mike, what is Liz studying?"

"Accounting," I replied. "She's going for an Associate's, and she'll probably find a job as a payroll or accounting clerk."

Liz brought our salads, and we began eating. The conversation moved to current events, sports, and anything except relationships. When we finished eating, we went for ice cream, and as I expected, Dale and Marie left together while Jocelyn, Bill, Elizaveta, and I got into Jocelyn's car, with Bill driving and Jocelyn in the passenger seat and headed for West Monroe.

"Did you know Marie had a concern about your plans?" Jocelyn asked.

"No," I replied. "Well, not specifically, but her response is pretty much what I hear from most people outside of church. Heck, even Clarissa questioned me about it. And that's OK because what Elizaveta and I are doing is considered crazy by societal standards. The thing is, the law contemplates what we're doing, which is why she can marry at sixteen with her parents' permission. So, it's actually NOT as crazy as people seem to think it is."

"Jocelyn said it's like an arranged marriage," Bill said.

"And I did the arranging!" Elizaveta declared, causing the rest of us to laugh.

When we arrived in West Monroe, where I'd left my car at Jocelyn's, Elizaveta and I bade 'goodbye' to Jocelyn and Bill, then got into my car for the rest of the drive back to McKinley.

"What's the plan for tomorrow?" I asked.

"My friends will be at the house at 11:30am. You can come over at 11:00am. We'll have lunch at noon, and after they leave, we'll spend the rest of the day together."

"Who all is going to be there?"

"Oksana, Britney, Johanna, Serafima, and Viktoriya. All of them except Britney are bringing their boyfriends. She doesn't have one right now."

"And Johanna's is on a leash?" I asked.

Elizaveta laughed, "You mean because I told you she controls boys with kisses?"

"I suspect it's more than kisses, given she told you that sex was bad."

"I think doing it with every guy you date is a bad idea, but I think your friend Marie disagrees. And I think you disagreed before we began seeing each other."

"It wasn't like that," I replied defensively.

"Wasn't it? I believe you've slept with at least four girls."

"Is this a conversation you really want to have?" I asked.

"I don't know," Elizaveta replied. "It's just...no, please forget I said anything."

"If it bothers you, then we do need to talk about it."

Elizaveta shook her head, "No, at least not now."

"We can't put off a conversation like that," I replied.

"No," she sighed. "I guess we can't. But not tonight."

"OK," I replied with trepidation.

We rode the rest of the way to Elizaveta's house with just the music playing from the radio and the hum of the tires on the road. When we arrived, I walked her to

the door, we exchanged a hug and a soft kiss, and I got back into my car to head to Doctor Blahnik's house. When I arrived, I checked my watch and decided to take a chance despite it being a bit late, and called Clarissa's house.

"Hi, Lissa," I said when she came to the phone.

"You don't sound right, Petrovich. What's wrong?"

"You know I set Marie up with Dale, right?"

"Sure. What could possibly have gone wrong with two people who agree on how to 'do college right'?"

"She questioned my relationship with Elizaveta, but that wasn't the specific problem; it was the attitude towards pre-marital sex, or perhaps 'casual sex', that was the concern. On the way home, Elizaveta made a comment about me agreeing with Marie and then accused me, for want of a better word, of having slept with at least four girls."

"More like five times that," Clarissa replied.

"You're not helping, Lissa," I sighed.

"What else did she say?"

"Nothing, and that's what concerns me. She started to, then decided not to, and when I asked, she said, 'Not now'."

"And you're worried that this will bother her if you don't talk about it, but you're frightened that if you do talk about it, it might end in disaster."

"It could end in disaster either way," I sighed. "I told her I wasn't a virgin to try to head off what I knew would be a difficult conversation fraught with all kinds of peril."

"I don't think you have a choice now. I'm no expert on relationships, but if you leave it unresolved, it'll fester and create huge problems in the future."

"I'd say that's very likely to be the case, which means I need to have an uncomfortable conversation with her."

"One you would have needed to have with Tasha as well."

"I think once she had her confrontation with Janey, there wasn't ever going to be a problem. And you know what she said to Janey!"

"That was epic! I just wish we could have actually heard the conversation instead of having it reported! And the confrontation in the school hallway, too!"

"I was happy to be outside the blast radius, though I almost got caught in the fallout! But anyway, after that, Tasha basically knew the score and chose not to make an issue of it."

"Strategy and tactics," Clarissa replied. "She knew she wanted to marry you, and she wasn't going to let you getting a little nookie on the side beforehand stand in her way. Elizaveta is more, well, sensitive, I guess is the right word."

"That's certainly part of it, but I think it also has to do with how Elizaveta viewed me beforehand -- a crush, I guess."

"Tasha had a crush!"

"Tasha wanted to screw!" I declared mirthfully. "That was lust, plain and simple. Marriage was secondary to passionate lovemaking."

"But she did plan to marry you, right?"

"Yes, until we concluded that we couldn't align our lives properly. I also think once I was being considered for the diaconate, her experience with living with a deacon of the Church gave her serious pause."

"You did manage to align your bodies properly!" Clarissa teased.

"Yes, which is precisely the problem. Well, not just Tasha, but the other girls."

"I don't know what to tell you other than to talk to Elizaveta, admit your failings, and listen to what she says. You really can't do anything else. If she can't deal with it, well..."

"I know," I sighed. "You wouldn't consider coming back to McKinley early, would you?"

"I'll come back tomorrow, if Doctor Blahnik is OK with me using the guest room."

"I'm sure she will be, but let me double-check."

I put the phone down and went to find Doctor Blahnik, and she agreed. I went back to the phone, let Clarissa know it was OK and that I'd see her in the evening when I came back from Elizaveta's house.

"Are you going to talk to her tomorrow, then?"

"I'll offer, but it's up to her. I can't insist, but I also can't let it drag out."

"No, you can't. See you tomorrow, Petrovich."

"See you tomorrow, Lissa. And thanks."

We said 'goodbye' and hung up, and then I went to say 'good night' to Doctor Blahnik. I went upstairs, drew a very warm bath, undressed, and got into the tub. I realized as I settled in that I'd forgotten to lock the door, but as I thought about it, I knew Doctor Blahnik wouldn't violate my privacy nor ask me to violate my word. And then, of course, with the way my mind worked, I thought about what that 'glass of wine' would be like. It took a supreme effort to push those thoughts away, and when I felt completely relaxed, I got out of the tub, opened the drain, dried off, then got into bed. I mulled over the situation with Elizaveta, and it took a long time for me to fall asleep.



December 28, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday morning, I had breakfast with Doctor Blahnik, then went to the music room to read, but I couldn't concentrate on the book because I was thinking about the difficult conversation I needed to have with Elizaveta. I finally put the book down after a half hour, put on my coat, gloves, boots, and new fedora, and went for a walk. It didn't help much because I had no idea how Elizaveta was going to respond.

After about twenty minutes, I gave up and went back to the house, got out my guitar, and managed to lose myself in the music. I eventually put the guitar away, changed into casual clothes, and headed to the Kozlovs' house. I had a bit of trepidation when I walked up to the front door because I wasn't quite sure what Elizaveta's mood would be. My unease grew when it was Viktor, rather than Elizaveta, who opened the door to greet me.

"Hi, Mike!" he said. "Come on in. Elizaveta is still in her room; I'm not sure what's keeping her."

I had a pretty good idea, and I wondered if she'd hide out in her room until her friends arrived. I'd thought she was more mature than that, but I also realized that the conversation we needed to have couldn't happen until after her friends had left and we could have some privacy.

"How were things at home?" he asked as we walked into his study.

"Fine," I replied. "It was good to see my friend Dale. I'll see him at the wedding, but then he's off to Seattle for a job with Boeing."

"Aerospace engineering?"

"Business. He'll be working in the 767 Program Office, where he's interned the past three Summers."

"I'd say he's done very well, then, and has a great start to a very lucrative career. The deregulation of the airlines should continue to reduce fares and increase air travel, which ought to be a good thing for Boeing. Of course, there will be negative effects because some of the big airlines don't have sustainable business models without government protection. But I know you abhor politics, so we'll just leave it at that."

"I have FAR too many other things on my mind to worry too much about politics."

"Elizaveta told me about the run-in you had with someone related to those boys who beat up your friends. Is there a concern?"

"No. It was just someone venting their spleen," I replied. "And there was already bad blood, if you will, because of the theological debate. If there's a next one, which I'm not seeking, I suspect they'll send someone who is better prepared. A mid-twenties youth pastor whose only experience is whatever seminary he graduated from was never going to do well against someone with two thousand years' worth of resource material! And honestly, we've heard all the arguments and responded to them. All I had to do was make use of the things which the Church has provided."

"Is it true that your friends are homosexual?"

"Yes."

Viktor gave me a hard look, but then his face softened, "You realize that might cause an uproar at the party if it should come out."

"I do. They're planning a party the night before the one you and my grandfather are organizing. The last thing they want to do is cause a scandal. That said, they have been to church -- they were at the betrothal ceremony, my ordination to subdeacon, as well as Pascha both of the last two years."

"Is anyone aware?"

"Father Nicholas, Tasha, and Elizaveta. Vladyka ARKADY, Mr. Sokolov, and Mr. Orlov know I have gay friends, though they don't know who they are."

"How is it that those men know?"

"A long story," I replied, "but the bottom line is that because they knew, I went to the bishop to discuss the situation. Those two guys are my best friends here; do you have a specific concern?"

"I'm not quite sure how to answer that," Viktor replied.

"How about honestly?" I asked with a slight smile.

He smiled wryly, "Too much honesty can get one into a world of trouble."

Given what was possibly going on with Elizaveta, there was no way I could disagree with him.

"I can see how that might be the case," I replied carefully. "Though, obviously, that can't apply to confession. So, do you have a serious concern with me having gay friends?"

"I'm still not quite sure how to answer that because it's not my place to tell you who your friends should be. That said, I do have a concern about how it would look as a clergyman to have homosexual friends."

"Isn't that the same as the objection the Pharisees had to Jesus' ministry?"

"Didn't he call them to repent?"

"Of course. And my friends know the Church's teaching. I believe my way is much more effective than haranguing them the way the youth pastor I debated did. They've come to church, and they're hearing the Gospel. Isn't that our goal?"

"It is, but you don't want to appear to be condoning that lifestyle."

"I understand, which is why I spoke to Vladyka ARKADY about the situation."

"I will leave it to his judgment, but I do think it's wise for your friends to have their own party rather than invite trouble."

"On that, we agree," I replied.

"Mike, please don't take this the wrong way, and forgive me for repeating myself, but you do need to be very, very careful. If people think you are condoning their lifestyle, it will cause tremendous problems."

It wasn't a 'lifestyle', but it wasn't the time for that particular discussion.

"I understand," I replied. "Love dictates my actions, but always within the context of the faith."

"Hi, Mike!" Elizaveta called from the door to her father's study, interrupting the conversation.

"Hi!" I replied, happy that my fear she was avoiding me was misplaced.

Viktor smiled and nodded, so I got up and went to Elizaveta, who hugged me and gave me a chaste kiss. She led me to the great room, where we sat on the couch.

"Sorry I was late coming down," she said. "I needed to finish a phone call."

"It's OK. Your dad is always happy to talk to me."

"He'd spend more time with you if I let him," Elizaveta said. "I assume you're going to keep playing golf?"

"I think my time will be too limited during medical school to commit to playing every week," I replied. "You know my priorities, and that falls way behind studying and you."

"And which of those is more important?" she asked.

"I don't think that's a fair question," I said gently. "You know we have to focus on medical school and everything that goes along with it, and in reality, we have almost no control over the demands it puts on us. And that means whatever time it leaves us has to be ours. There really is no other way for us to become Doctor and Mrs. Loucks."

"We? Us?"

"I think it has to be stated that way. In as much as you'll be a «διακόνισσα» (*diakónissa*), you'll also be a doctor's wife. In a sense, it's no different from Deacon Michael and Matushka Elizaveta -- a shared calling and ministry. I can't do either without my wife being fully involved and fully committed." ("Deacon's wife [Lit. Deaconess])"

"I guess I hadn't thought of your medical license creating the same kind of shared ministry as your ordination."

"Both are serious commitments on your part; in fact, probably more so than for me, in that I'm the one receiving the license and ordination and have the official capacities. But do you think I could fulfill my obligations without a wife who was equally committed?"

"No, I don't think you could, which is why you talked to me about those things."

"And why you spoke with Doctor Evgeni's wife, Maria, as well as Matushka Natalya and Matushka Anastasia. The only thing I can do is commit to prioritizing my time with you once my studies are accounted for."

Elizaveta was quiet for a moment, and I simply stayed silent as I was sure she was thinking about the commitment she'd made, which, perhaps for the first time, was truly hitting home. And if I added in her discomfort with my past

promiscuity, I wondered if she was having second thoughts. If she was, this was the time to get them out on the table. All I could do for the immediate moment was wait for her to say something because I didn't want to push the conversation before she was ready to have it. There were nearly five minutes of increasingly uncomfortable silence before she spoke.

"I think this is going to be even more difficult than I imagined," she said quietly.

"Are you still upset about the other thing?"

"I was talking to Tasha, which is why I was delayed coming downstairs. I wanted to know how she handled your, uhm, behavior together, with Nik. I guess she also knew you had been with other girls."

I nodded, "Given some things that happened, she was pretty sure that had happened. She said when she told Nik, he became very upset and wanted to break things off."

"She also told me," Elizaveta continued, "about an incident with some other girl she didn't name and how she decided, in the end, she wanted to be with you enough to forgive you for the transgression. Can you look me in the eyes and tell me truthfully that since we began dating, you've behaved properly?"

"Yes, I can, because I have."

"In a way, it's different from Tasha because you were seeing her when you were behaving improperly. But she seems to blame her dad for the situation, even though, in the end, you two decided not to marry."

"He was certainly overprotective," I replied. "But I think, given the end result, his concerns were justified, in a way."

"Because you and Tasha decided to go to bed together?"

"Yes."

"She told me she'd made you promise not to do that, and you kept the promise. Was that because you had other girls willing to do that with you?"

"No," I replied. "It was because I kept my promise."

"And you'll be able to keep your promise to me? You won't decide you want or need other girls?"

"Yes, I will keep my promise," I replied sincerely. "And no, I won't decide I want or need other girls."

"But what if I'm not as good at it as some other girl you've been with?" she asked quietly, blushing slightly.

The doorbell rang just as I was about to answer, but I felt I had to at least say something.

"I don't think that's something you need to be concerned about," I said gently. "We'll talk after your friends leave."

She smiled nervously, then got up and went to the door. She was back a moment later with some friends she introduced as Britney, Johanna, and Craig, who was Johanna's boyfriend. In rapid succession, the girls from church -- Oksana, Serafima, and Viktoriya arrived, each with a boyfriend in tow. I didn't recognize any of the guys except Elias, Serafima's long-term boyfriend. The other two were introduced as John and Steve. That didn't surprise me, as there was a paucity of guys in the sixteen-to-twenty group, which would have been the typical ages for

their boyfriends, and Serafima and Elias had been a couple since they were much younger.

"Lunch is ready," Elizaveta said. "I prepared everything earlier."

"What are we having?" Oksana asked.

"Homemade beef and vegetable soup, homemade black bread, and then ice cream for dessert."

She led us all to the dining room, then she and Oksana went into the kitchen to bring out the food. I would have preferred to help, but Yulia's kitchen was generally off-limits to men. That wasn't something I would tolerate in my house, but this wasn't my house. I made a mental note to discuss that with Elizaveta, as I expected any sons I might have to do chores the way I did, which included doing the dishes.

"Mike, would you give the blessing, please?" Elizaveta asked.

I nodded and gave the standard Orthodox meal blessing -- '*O Lord, bless the food and drink of Thy servants, for Thou art holy unto the ages of ages. Amen*'. We began eating, and I mostly listened to Elizaveta and her friends and their boyfriends talk. It was exceedingly clear that Johanna kept her boyfriend on a VERY short leash because every time he opened his mouth, which was rare, he looked to Johanna for approval, and several times, she 'corrected' what he said. The word that came to mind was 'whipped', and he was only seventeen or eighteen.

The other guys all seemed more free to speak and acted more normally, at least as far as I could see, and overall, I thought they were all pretty typical High School kids, though I was probably not the best person to make that observation given I'd been an introverted, reserved, nerd who played chess and had barely made it to second base before graduation. Of course, getting past second base

after graduating had created difficulties with Elizaveta, which we still had to discuss.

I did answer a few questions about medical school and becoming a deacon, but mostly, the girls carried the conversation with each other, with the guys occasionally making comments or answering questions. I got a picture of a bunch of High School kids who weren't altogether unlike I had been, though a bit more outgoing. The guys weren't jocks, and the girls weren't cheerleaders, and none of them were 'burnouts', which to me meant 'normal'.

When we finished eating, Elizaveta sent all the guys to the great room while she and the girls cleaned up and did the dishes. That gave the guys a chance to actually talk without the girls monopolizing the conversation. I discovered they were mostly football fans, though they liked the Reds as well. Of course, caring about the Reds wasn't the same as it had been in the 70s when 'The Big Red Machine' had been the best team in the major leagues and, in my mind, the best in the history of baseball.

The girls rejoined us after about fifteen minutes, and about ten minutes later, everyone left as had been planned. That allowed Elizaveta and me to continue our talk. Since her brothers were out, we went to what she called the 'TV room' but which I would have called a 'den' because that's what Jocelyn's and Dale's families had called their TV room. Our TV had simply been in the living room, with a second one in the basement.

"You don't have anything to worry about," I said when we sat down on the couch.

"But how do you know?" she asked.

"Do you intend to practice until you get it right?" I asked with a slight grin.

Elizaveta laughed softly, which was what I'd hoped would happen.

"Practice makes perfect?" she asked.

"Our wedding night will be perfect, and it will only get better after that!"

"How can you be better than perfect?"

"With lots of practice!"

"But how do you know I'll be good at it? Or that you'll like it with me? And what happens when I get pregnant and get fat?"

"I think you'll just have to trust me," I replied.

"But those other girls..."

"Are in the past, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I soothed. "I promise." ("Kitten")

"Did you ever call anyone else by that name?"

I had used it once, teasingly, with Tasha, but only in a silly way in an attempt to deflect Tasha from a course of action which was wrong for both time and place. That meant I could truthfully say I hadn't used it as a pet name for anyone but Elizaveta.

I shook my head, "Only you. And you're the only one I ever called «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*)." ("Bunny Rabbit")

"What about other nicknames?"

"No, except if you mean diminutives or shortening of their names, then it would be Jos and Lissa. You've heard me call Clarissa that and heard her call me 'Petrovich'."

"I thought that was weird at first because it's how my grandfathers address their friends and each other. But it makes a weird kind of sense because she's a lesbian. It's like she might as well be a guy."

Which reinforced my belief that Clarissa was, indeed, the biggest risk because I COULD get away with it, and Elizaveta would never suspect.

"She asked me to have a sex-change operation; I declined."

"Gross!" Elizaveta declared, making a face.

"She was kidding," I replied. "But it does make the point pretty clearly. I mean, if she wasn't openly dating Abby, which is a pretty clear sign."

"Is that her first girlfriend?"

"No, that was Glenda. Glenda dumped Clarissa by applying to an art school in Chicago without telling Clarissa about it until Glenda had been accepted and signed her acceptance letter."

"That's cruel! Why?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea. It took some time, but Clarissa got over it, and she's very happy with Abby."

"When did you find out she was a lesbian?"

"Not until after we became study partners," I replied. "I was the first person she ever told."

"Why you?"

"Because she felt comfortable talking to me and was sure I wouldn't freak out about it. That was when Angie and I were, well, I'm not sure what we were."

"How is she?"

"OK, I think. I talked to her last week. She's going to come to our wedding, and actually, she'd like to come to the shower your grandmothers and friends are arranging, but her mom would need to come with her."

"That would be fine," Elizaveta replied, paused for a moment, then continued, "May I ask a direct question?"

"Of course."

"You and Angie?"

I quickly debated how to answer, or if I should answer, but it was a way to engender trust, and I wouldn't be revealing something which wasn't widely known amongst my close friends.

"One proper kiss, very early on, which was years ago, and that was it," I replied. "She did kiss me on the cheek quite often when I walked her to her room after we prayed, but she adamantly refused to have any kind of romantic relationship."

"But you wanted one."

"I was in love with her."

"And now?"

"I care very deeply about her and want her to have a happy life. I just hope that's possible."

"You don't think it is?"

"She'll likely never marry or have kids, two things which were very important to her.

"That's really sad," Elizaveta replied.

"It is. Can we go back to the conversation about my priorities?"

"You're worried I'm having second thoughts?"

"I'm concerned, yes, but I'm also sure you're mature enough to handle it."

"You are?" she asked, sounding skeptical.

"I recall a confident young woman making a strong case for being my wife and not being willing to take 'no' for an answer! You told me you knew how to cook, bake, clean, do laundry, sew, care for babies, and you told me you were sure you could figure out how to make them! And you insisted those qualities were the ones necessary for a 'good wife', as you put it. That confident young woman basically asked me to marry her, and I said 'yes'. I think, and perhaps it is sufficient to change things, that this is really related to my 'experience', as we call it."

Elizaveta sighed heavily, "Probably. I mean related, not that I'm breaking our betrothal."

"May I say something very direct?"

"Yes."

"We need to find a way to get past this before we marry," I said gently.

"Otherwise, it's going to be a continual sore point with the potential to create serious problems in our marriage. It's not something I can change because it's in the past. You handled it maturely when I first told you."

Elizaveta's eyes narrowed, "But you didn't tell me! You let me believe that you had been with Tasha and that it happened when you thought you were going to marry!"

She had a very good point, and I couldn't in good conscience deny that I'd told her in a way that was intended to give the exact impression she'd had. Weirdly, by being honest with her about having 'experience in matters of love', I'd created distrust. I took a deep breath and let it out carefully so as not to sound like I was sighing.

"I'm sorry that I told you in a way that let you form a wrong impression," I said. "I was obviously concerned about how you would react, and I made an error in judgment. I felt I had to tell you I wasn't a virgin, but I also felt it was inappropriate to go into the details of my 'experience'. That said, it was wrong of me to intentionally give you the wrong impression, and I'm sorry. I hope you can see your way clear to forgive me."

"I'd be a terrible Christian if I couldn't," she said. "But that doesn't make it easy. On one hand, you didn't cheat on me, but on the other, you told the truth in such a way that it was really a lie. And as much as I disapprove of your behavior with those girls, lying to me is the real problem."

"I have no defense other than I did what I thought was best at the time. For what it's worth, Doctor Mercer encouraged me to not just admit I had experience, but that I had engaged in several casual relationships besides the ones I think you've discerned from meeting and talking to my friends. But even in those cases, I can't actually say it happened, with the exception of Tasha, because she told you. Saying anything more than what I've said in the past week would be «некультурный» (*nekulturny*) in the extreme. It's not something a guy can really talk about without completely disrespecting a girl." ("uncouth")

"You don't think you disrespected them by having casual sex?"

"In the sense that we 'missed the mark' and sinned? I can see that. But from a philosophical or social perspective, no, because we acted of our own free will. I'm not excusing my behavior, and I've been to confession and received absolution. Father's blessing for me to ask you to marry me, as well as his support for my ordination, were both contingent on behaving properly. And as I said, all of that happened before I had dinner with your family the first time."

"None of which excuses you trying to hide the truth from me."

And that called into question my entire relationship with Clarissa. I couldn't be completely honest with Elizaveta about Clarissa because that would violate a confidence which I felt bound to keep. That wasn't the only potential concern, but it surely was the biggest, and I was stuck in a situation where I couldn't tell my future wife the truth about my relationship with my best friend. I didn't know how to resolve that dilemma. I'd talk about it with Clarissa when she arrived, but I felt I needed to speak to Doctor Mercer as well. There HAD to be a way to navigate this rocky path without stumbling too much, but I had no idea how to do that.

"No, it doesn't," I replied. "And I won't try to make excuses. Within the bounds of propriety and consistent with my vows as a Deacon and my oath as a Doctor, I promise to be truthful to you and not try to deceive you again."

"But how do I know?"

"That is the \$64,000 question," I replied. "And I don't have an answer."

XXXIX. I Can't Lose You

December 28, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

"That's how you left it?" Clarissa asked later that evening as we sat by the fireplace.

"Given I didn't have an answer to her question, there wasn't really anything more I could say. She didn't make me leave or anything, and we had a nice dinner with her parents and maternal grandparents. And she kissed me properly when I left."

"That's good, I think."

"I think it's neutral, which is, I suppose, 'good' from one perspective."

"I think you were right about needing to resolve this now rather than later. I also think you were right to say you were going to have a talk with Doctor Mercer."

"Actually, I didn't say that to Elizaveta," I replied. "I said that Doctor Mercer had advised me to be completely honest. The 'have a talk with Doctor Mercer' was an internal conversation with myself. Sorry if that wasn't clear."

"It wasn't, but that does make sense. Does she know I'm here?"

I nodded, "I told her you were coming back tonight and that you planned to stay the rest of break as we discussed. You were going to come back on Monday anyway, so you could be at the New Year's Eve party here."

"And you haven't spilled the beans about us?"

I shook my head, "That's private between you and me, with the exception that Jocelyn obviously knows, as does Doctor Mercer. And we told Sandy in Cincinnati. In everyone else's mind, all we do is cuddle. Heck, nobody has seen us kiss beyond the kiss on the cheek when you left to go home, and I'm not sure anyone even saw that. I was very careful to tell Elizaveta that revealing confidences was «некультурный» (*nekulturny*), and she didn't object to that. She obviously knows about Tasha because they've talked, and she guessed I was with Jocelyn and, from my comment about what I said to my dad, that I was with other girls. She hasn't asked the number, and I haven't volunteered."
("inappropriate")

"If you did, you think that would be the end of it?"

"I think if she's struggling with four, the actual number would absolutely be the end of it. But it's a bit deeper than that, as I said."

"Her concerns about her own adequacy as a lover and you comparing her to other girls."

"Exactly. I don't compare, except in sort of a general way, in that I'm much more interested in gentleness than being wild."

"Duh!" Clarissa replied with a laugh. "I think some days you'd rather cuddle than have sex!"

"Some days, I would," I replied. "As Sandy and I discussed, it was sleeping, and I mean the actual sleeping part, that was the best part of our relationship. It wasn't that the sex was bad or boring or anything; it was the physical closeness that really made it work for both of us."

"After she worked out her stress by having you fuck her brains out!"

"Perhaps," I grinned.

"I'm not sure what you can do about the adequacy question if you're going to stick to your commitment to be chaste until your wedding."

"I have no choice in the matter because I ran right to the end of the cliff on that topic with regard to ordination. I went way beyond pushing the edge of the envelope and stopping just before it was ripped to shreds. Basically, Father Nicholas gave me enough rope with which to hang myself, and I nearly did so."

"So you regret being sexually active?"

"I regret letting it get out of control," I replied. "Jocelyn, Emmy, Milena, Kimiko, and you are the ones I can truly come to terms with in my mind. The rest? Probably not, though in varying degrees of 'not'. Individually, I can justify, at least in my mind, nearly all of them, but taken as a whole, I can't. I basically did exactly what I was worried I would do -- the slippery slope of letting my weakness control me. What I wanted was closeness, and sex was a way to get that. And while I'm not blaming them, what happened with Jocelyn and Angie created the perfect situation for me to fail."

"What's your next step?"

"Well, unless I call her emergency number, I won't be able to see Doctor Mercer until after New Year's. I probably need to speak with Father Nicholas, though I'm not quite sure what to say to him."

"Because the confession rules make it such that you could tell him you were having sex, but not with whom, and just as you did with Elizaveta, you effectively misled him."

"You're not helping, Lissa," I sighed. "Unless your goal is to get me to beat myself up even more."

"But it's true, right?"

"Yes. And even if I talk to him about it, he won't ask the number -- I'd have to volunteer it. But he does know there were multiple girls."

"You can refuse to answer, obviously, but does HE know about Tasha?"

"That's an interesting question. She was attending Holy Transfiguration at that point, so Father Herman was her confessor. She told Nik she wasn't a virgin, and he put two and two together and came up with Mike and Tasha. I have no idea if he or Tasha said anything to Father Nicholas about her not being a virgin. Nik was upset, as I told you, but she said she talked him off the ledge, so to speak, and he's been nothing but friendly. Yes, I got the evil eye once, but he and Elizaveta are basically in the same boat with the ex-lover situation."

"Nik is a virgin?"

"I prefer to assume that's the case rather than think he's a hypocrite."

"He wouldn't be the first guy to be sexually active but demand a virgin bride."

"No, but it would be highly hypocritical. You know my take on that issue."

"That you can't hold anyone to a higher standard than the one to which you hold yourself."

"Or, in Bible terms -- Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in

your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Fundamentally, that's about hypocrisy. Too many people read it as a command not to judge, but that's not what it says. It says you're going to be judged according to your OWN standards. And I quoted the rest because it's one of the key verses I try to practice, though I usually use log and splinter, but I quoted the New King James, which is what we use in church."

"Which is why your friends have no trouble with you being religious -- you don't rub their noses in it."

"What good would that do? Honestly, it doesn't even make sense, in addition to being the exact opposite of what Jesus did! Remember when we were talking to Glenda, and I quoted Mahatma Gandhi? *'I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.'* Even if that's apocryphal, truer words have never been spoken."

"But not you."

"Except I fail to live up to the perfection, and as such, I'm in no position to truly criticize. It's one thing to call out theological error or point out that a practice isn't helpful; it's a very different thing to condemn a 'sinner' when you have plenty of your own sins to worry about."

"I don't recall you ever saying Reverend Saddler was a sinner."

I chuckled, "If I had, it would have been a true statement. I never called out specific sins, at least not in the sense of calling them sins. I pointed out erroneous theology and what I felt were ineffective methods, which is far different from criticizing him as a person."

"Not who he is, but what he does?"

"Who he is, is a child of God, just as you are and just as I am. And I make my own mistakes, but generally, I mind my own business. It was only when he tried to use the Bible to attack my friends and was harassing them that I stepped in, which, by the way, was Jesus' model -- go after the hypocrites who felt they were better than others. Otherwise, my approach has always been to do my best to model Christ's love for his fellow man and to live my life as best I could with a mortal body, which gives me a proclivity to sin.

"Go back one chapter in Matthew, and he writes '*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*' Good advice, obviously, and in a chapter which absolutely and unequivocally condemns hypocrisy. My disdain for hypocrites is well-grounded in Scripture and theology. And I fully expect to be called out for my own hypocrisy when it rears its ugly head."

"What hypocrisy?"

"I wasn't thinking about anything specific, but I'm sure, in some way, I've acted hypocritically."

"That would be news to me and everyone else."

"And yet, it's likely true. In any event, I still have to figure out what to do about Elizaveta."

"Do you think she's going to call it off?"

"I think, more likely, she'd expect ME to call it off if I knew she was uncomfortable. And she'd be right, at least in the sense that I would take full responsibility for ending it."

"And?"

I shrugged, "I don't rightly know. Which is the same thing Elizaveta said. But I am convinced that if we don't find a way past this now, such that it never arises again, I'm compelled to call it off rather than risk complete disaster down the road."

"Divorce?"

"Or a completely unhappy marriage maintained simply for appearance' sake or for kids we might have together."

"That's a hell of a thing, Petrovich."

"TELL me about it," I sighed. "And worse, the one thing I need right now, more than anything, I can't do because it would be too risky."

"Sleep together? I mean, actually sleep."

"And that's the rub, if you will -- being in bed with you, in even a slightly unstable emotional state, could lead to something disastrous."

"And you think I'd just drop my panties for you?"

"If you thought it would help me emotionally, I am reasonably sure you would. And I don't mean that in a negative way, if that even makes sense."

"As with just about everything in our relationship, it's crazy enough that it makes sense! It's why you identified the risk. And having had time to think about it, I'm absolutely sure you're right about it. And not just for you, but for me, too."

"Which is why we've drawn a bright red line and why we have to be ever-vigilant not to cross it, or really, even come close to it. That was settled once you turned down my proposal."

Clarissa laughed softly, "It wasn't real, even if it was sincere, if that makes sense."

"Not real, as in not in this reality, then yes, I agree. But I was certainly sincere about it, as you say."

"Speaking of lines, did you talk to Angie?"

"Yes. She's going to come to the wedding, and she'll come to the bridal shower they're throwing, though her mom will need to come to that. Angie isn't allowed to attend those kinds of things without supervision. Well, 'allowed' is the wrong term -- Doctor Mercer strongly advises that she have someone who knows her really well be with her when she's in any place she might get overstimulated. She only goes to the mall with a close friend or her mom, and so on."

"That's just...I don't know a word besides 'crazy', but that seems wrong."

"Because it is crazy," I replied. "Elizaveta knows how I feel about Angie, too."

"That has to be tough because you were deeply in love with Angie, and from what you've said, neither you nor Elizaveta have said 'I love you' to each other."

"No, we haven't, and yes, I suspect that's tough on Elizaveta. But this was never a love match, and the kind of love we'll have is «agápē»."

"With a bit of «érōs» thrown in?" Clarissa smirked.

"A bit," I chuckled.

"Can I ask you a very direct, very intimate question?"

"Asks my soulmate, with whom I've swapped spit and other fluids?" I grinned.

Clarissa laughed, "Nice one. 'Other fluids'?!"

"I was being polite. Go on."

"Have you thought about how you're going to approach your wedding night?"

"Not really," I replied. "Which angle concerns you?"

"The angle of the dangle..." Clarissa smirked.

"Jocelyn nearly killed her boyfriend our Junior year for repeating that!" I replied, laughing. "Dale and I found it hilarious!"

"I bet!" Clarissa replied mirthfully. "On both points! But seriously, it's probably related to her feelings of inadequacy -- do you have a sweet, simple consummation, or do you, knowing her concern, give her an erotic night to remember? Or something in between?"

"I haven't given it any thought. But wouldn't that really be up to her?"

"Think about what she told you, Petrovich -- she doesn't know anything more than she learned in sex ed and maybe the girls' locker room. Does she even know the possibilities? Is she in any position to ask? And with her concern about her skills, for lack of a better word, will she even be able to ask?"

"I hadn't even considered that," I replied.

"And it's more complicated than that -- how is she going to react to you asking her to do things or having you do things?"

"You sure know how to cause trouble, Lissa," I replied.

"NOT thinking about it is going to cause trouble."

"You're right, of course," I replied. "I think I have a second, obviously related, topic to discuss with Doctor Mercer."

"Is going to see her, without telling Elizaveta, deceitful? And even if it's not, is it a good strategy?"

"You know Doctor Mercer is interested in a professional relationship in the future, and I'm helping with Angie as best I can as a layman, so I'm not sure how to answer that. Do I need to tell Elizaveta about every professional interaction I have?"

"But this isn't professional, it's personal -- you're going for counseling. Would you tell her if you went for counseling for stress or whatever during training?"

"I think I'd have to, and I think I'd want to."

"Then I think you have to tell her you're going to go see Doctor Mercer."

"I think you're right. This is WAY more difficult than I expected; not that I expected it to be easy."



December 29, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, after Clarissa and I ate breakfast with Doctor Blahnik and Derek, I decided to call Doctor Mercer's office to see if, by chance, she was in and if she was available. She answered, and after a bit of back and forth, she suggested we simply speak by phone later in the morning when she'd finished her appointment. I decided that was the best option and that I could tell Elizaveta after the fact. Doctor Mercer called back about ninety minutes later, as we'd agreed.

"There was actually a good reason I suggested you come completely clean," Doctor Mercer said after I'd explained the situation.

"Yes, I know, and I hope you'll spare me more 'I told you so' answers."

"One per patient," Doctor Mercer said lightly. "It does have to be said to make a point, but beating a dead horse isn't very effective."

"No, it isn't. So, what's your advice?"

"In all honesty? Patience. She has to work through her concerns, and there really isn't much you can do except wait."

"I was afraid you might say that," I said, suppressing a sigh. "There is another issue, and that assumes we get through this crisis -- how to approach our wedding night given her feelings of inadequacy."

"And you feel you can't really discuss it with her because she's going to compare herself to other girls and what they did."

"Exactly. Clarissa raised that potential problem last night when we were talking through my concerns."

"You need to be careful there."

"Trust me, I know," I replied.

"Yes, that, too. But you're already going to intimately share your school and work with Clarissa. Think how Elizaveta would feel if you also confided in Clarissa about marriage issues."

"«Гобно» (gavno)!" I growled. "And to think last night I said this was harder than I expected it to be." ("Shit!")

"You didn't think this was going to be easy, did you?"

"No, of course not! That said, it is going to be WAY harder than I imagined."

"Marriage is hard to start with, and you're throwing in medical school, ordination, and distinctly different sexual histories. If you didn't think it was going to be extremely difficult, you weren't thinking clearly. I do recall you talking to me about how difficult it was going to be."

"I think I talked to you about how difficult it was going to be to find a young woman who could handle it more than the difficulty in actually starting the relationship. And that's what I was getting at -- the difficulties I'm having now, which I didn't expect."

"You thought that once you found a young woman who would accept the conditions, everything would be rosy? You aren't that naïve, Mike!"

"I didn't think rosy, but I also agree I probably didn't think through the intimacy issue. And I don't mean sex by that."

"An 'emotional affair' can actually be far more devastating to a relationship, if you think about it."

"I suppose I can see that."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"No," I replied. "I'm worried Elizaveta is having second thoughts."

"I'd say she is, and you need to be patient and let her work through this. I do need to ask what you'll do if she can't work through it or she hasn't worked through it by May."

"I don't know," I replied.

"If it isn't resolved, you can't go through with the marriage."

"I know," I replied. "I said that to Clarissa last night."

"Then you DO know what you'll do."

"I guess so," I sighed.

"Mike, just be patient right now. She's intelligent and mature, and she didn't rashly break things off with you. Give her time to work through everything, and when she's ready to talk to you about it, make sure you listen to what she has to say, take it to heart, and then decide what to do."

"OK," I said somewhat sullenly.

"Don't get depressed; that won't help at all. Remember, I'm here if you need me. Please call my emergency number if you need me outside of office hours."

"Thanks," I replied.

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then went to find Clarissa.

"Life sucks," I sighed, sinking down onto the couch next to her.

"What happened?"

"She told me to be patient, which I totally get, but she also cautioned me about sharing too much with you."

"Because of how Elizaveta might react?"

"Doctor Mercer pointed out how intimate you and I will be with regard to school and work, and if you're my closest confidante, that could create problems in my marriage."

"What are you saying?" Clarissa asked nervously.

"Hell if I know," I replied. "I'm just telling you what Doctor Mercer said."

"Petrovich..." she began softly.

"Please don't say it!" I interrupted quickly. "You don't mean it!"

"But if it's the only way..."

I shook my head, "Lissa, you can't do that. We tried, and you know better."

"But I can't lose you!" she protested, on the verge of tears.

I scooted closer and put my arm around Clarissa's shoulder. She turned, snuggled close, and put her head on my chest.

"I know," I soothed. "I feel the same way."

"Then why tell me 'no'?"

"Because denying who you are is no solution to the problem. There has to be a solution to this; I just don't know what it is."

Which was the same thing I'd told Elizaveta. Everything had seemed like it was OK, but in the last few days, things had spiraled completely out of control. Doctor Mercer had counseled patience, but all that would do was extend the turmoil. That said, unless I took decisive action, which I was not ready to do, there was nothing to do but wait. And as I'd said to my mom, 'waiting is the hardest part'.

Clarissa's offer to marry was, in some ways, similar to Angie's request to go to bed together -- something I had truly desired, but given the circumstances, something I couldn't do. Acting on either girl's request had the potential for seriously negative consequences, which might make things even worse. And that was why I needed to resolve the issues with Elizaveta, though I wondered if she could truly put the issue of my promiscuity in the past.

I realized, as Clarissa and I cuddled, that the problems I was having with Elizaveta concerning my past would probably have occurred with any of the conservative Orthodox girls unless I completely hid my behavior after I'd completed High School. Lara was an exception, but she, like Tasha, was unable to make the commitment to being the wife of a Deacon. Tasha's reasons were broader, but that was a key component, something I should have realized sooner, given her relationship with her dad.

Was I doing the right thing marrying Elizaveta? I had thought so, and it still made sense, IF she could come to terms with my past. If not, then what? Refuse ordination for the near future and go back to my original plan of not marrying until after medical school and my first year of Residency? That presented its own set of challenges, including five-and-a-half years of chastity. I wasn't sure I could handle that, and any failure in that area would be sufficient to put an end to any consideration of ordination.

It hit me, suddenly, that there WAS one girl who could handle my past, who would be willing to accept what amounted to terms for a relationship with me, but with whom I'd basically lost contact except for very occasional letters -- Becky van Dorn. I wondered if it had been a mistake to let that relationship wither, but I had, and I wasn't sure how she'd react to me trying to rekindle a relationship with her if things with Elizaveta were to come completely unraveled.

I shook my head to clear my mind because I was putting the cart before the horse and letting my thoughts run to places to which they had no business going. I had two distinct concerns, which were also intertwined, which I had to handle, and running away from either of them was not an option. I could no more break off my betrothal than I could break my commitment to Clarissa. I had to find a way to make both relationships work; well, assuming Elizaveta still wanted to move forward.

"What are you thinking about?" Clarissa asked.

"That ought to be obvious," I replied.

"Yes, but I meant specifically."

"That I've put myself in a real pickle with my behavior."

"I think it's your pickle that got you into the situation!"

I couldn't help but laugh despite my dour mood.

"At least part of it," I replied. "Our relationship really doesn't have to do with sex, despite having made love on two occasions."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I think everything depends on Elizaveta. If she decides she can handle my past, then we'll have to deal with my very intimate relationship with you. If she can't, well, that's a whole other ball of wax, as they say."

"I assume you'd put off your ordination in that case."

"I'd have to. Lifelong chastity is not something I can handle."

"I know this sounds a bit crass, but is there another girl?"

"Any conservative Orthodox girl who was able to take on the role of a Deacon's wife would likely have the same difficulties with my past that Elizaveta has. And girls like Lara or Katy aren't up for living under the microscope that my ordination would bring. And that's another reason what you were about to offer won't work -- you can't live like that."

"Who, then?"

"Angie, if she were mentally healthy," I replied. "Maybe Becky, but I haven't really had any contact with her in the last year except the occasional card or letter. But I don't think it's wise to speculate about anything like that. I need to stay focused on Elizaveta."

"Are you really sure she's the right girl?"

"I think we're at the last couple of hurdles, and if we can get over them, we'll be OK. Not in the sense we won't have difficulties in the future, but in the sense that we've proved we can work through anything which might arise."

"I can't lose you, Petrovich!"

"I know, Lissa. I understand what Doctor Mercer is saying, but it's also the case that I do need someone to talk to. And yes, I'll find a good male friend in medical school, but nobody is going to replace you as my best friend, no matter what Doctor Mercer says."

"And Elizaveta?"

"I'll figure it out," I replied.

Of course, I had no idea how I was going to do that, but I had to find some way forward, assuming Elizaveta was willing. Clarissa and I sat cuddled together for another twenty minutes before I left to get Elizaveta so we could spend the day at Doctor Blahnik's house and then go to Vespers and dinner. She was ready when I arrived, and after a quick hug and kiss, we walked back to my Mustang. I gave her the keys so she could practice driving, and after adjusting the seat and mirrors, we were on our way.

"Remember, it's going to take longer to stop because the roads are a bit slick," I cautioned. "Just be careful and allow for the fact that the car might not respond the way you expect when you press the brake. If it begins to slide, turn the wheel in the direction of the slide."

"Why?"

"That will help the car regain traction. Whatever you do, do not jam on the brakes because the car WILL slide, and you won't be able to stop."

She did a credible job, with just a bit of guidance, and we arrived safely at Doctor Blahnik's house. When we went inside, Clarissa had hot chocolate waiting for us, and then she quietly went to her room while Elizaveta and I sat by the fire.

"I spoke with Doctor Mercer this morning before I came to get you," I said.

"Did that help?"

"I got an 'I told you so', which she was justified in saying. But I'm not sure any other approach was better. I chose the one with the most likelihood of success without telling a direct lie."

"When I was thinking last night, I realized that if you didn't want to directly lie, you didn't really have a choice because that early in the relationship, I would have probably told you to go away."

"And now?"

"It's all so complicated -- I know what I want, but the only way to get it is to accept things which bother me. My dad always says that you have to accept the bad with the good and that if you want something badly enough, you have to make allowances for the bad."

"But that only goes so far, right? Don't you think there are some things we couldn't accept, so we would have to give up on what we wanted?"

There certainly were for me -- fulfilling Angie's request and accepting Clarissa's implied offer to get married. Both of those risked disaster in the future -- disaster which could destroy us, our vocations, and our families.

"I think so," Elizaveta answered slowly. "And ultimately, I think I can accept the situation, except I'm still having trouble with the deception."

"Do you accept the concept that it would be completely inappropriate for me to reveal the names of any girls I've been with?"

"I think I have to because it wouldn't be fair to the girls. Even though I would never be in that situation, if I somehow were, I wouldn't want the guy to tell. That would be totally wrong. Part of what worries me is that you have so many female friends. Clarissa is fine, obviously, because she likes girls, but Sandy and Fran are your other study partners, right?"

Clarissa most definitely was not 'fine' by any stretch of the imagination, but I couldn't really say anything about that for the reasons just given, which ran into direct conflict with my vow to tell Elizaveta the truth. In my mind, I justified it as similar to the privacy due to my future patients, but that felt like a cop-out answer.

"Both Sandy and Fran have boyfriends who they've been seeing for some time," I replied. "In fact, Fran and Pete started dating during Freshman year."

"It's weird because I never had any friends who were guys, even when I was little. It was always girls."

"And you know my very first friend was Jocelyn, and our friendship started in kindergarten. We met Dale when we were in second grade. I guess it's just normal for me to have friends of both sexes. You and I discussed how Clarissa has been a big help to me."

"I know, and that doesn't concern me at all. Her being your friend is just fine. I'd just prefer you had more friends who were guys."

"That's the advice I was given by Father Nicholas, and I plan to follow it. When we create our study group for medical school, I'll make sure there are guys in the group, and hopefully one of them will become close. And you know I'm becoming close to your dad, and I hope to become close to your brother. And there's Nik as well; you're becoming closer to Tasha, obviously, given that you called to talk to her."

"What Orthodox girl knows you better than Natalya Vasilyevna?"

"None, except my mom, but that's different."

"True."

"And remember, too, that once I'm ordained, the clergy guidelines strongly discourage being anywhere alone with a girl who's not part of the family."

"How does that work with being a doctor?"

"It really isn't a concern because I'll be working in the ER, and there are always multiple people around. In private practice, it might be a risk that I was in the office with just a nurse or whatever, but that's not likely to happen in an ER."

"What about your friends?"

"There are plenty of public places where we could have private conversations," I replied. "But mostly we hang out as a group, so I expect that to continue. I guess my question is, what can I do to make you more comfortable?"

"I don't want to be controlling, like Johanna."

"A non-controlling «бабушка» (*babushka*)?" I asked with a grin. "Somebody call the *Guinness Book of World Records* and tell them to stop the presses!"

"Hey!" Elizaveta protested.

"True, you did qualify it by saying 'like Johanna!'" I teased.

"Careful, husband!"

Elizaveta, using that word, told me we were moving forward, but I didn't feel we were out of the minefield just yet.

"You look relieved," Elizaveta observed.

"I am," I replied. "The way we left things last night concerned me."

"And you thought I would give up that easily?"

"No, but that didn't mean I wasn't worried. Doctor Mercer told me you are intelligent and mature enough to work through the difficulty we're having right now."

"You didn't think I was?"

"I knew you **COULD**, but I wasn't sure you **WOULD**. Not because you are immature but precisely because you are mature enough to realize that you might not be able to deal with the situation. And you are intelligent enough to know the potential disaster which might befall us."

"Divorce?"

"Even if it didn't come to that, and I would hope it never would, it could create a rift which was difficult, if not impossible, to heal. That would make things very difficult for us, as well as for our kids. Which is why we have to resolve this now and put it behind us."

"You mean like never bring it up in the future?"

"I mean, resolve it so there is no need to bring it up in the future. I'd like if at all possible, to have the clock start with when I came to dinner at your house. Not that I'm not responsible for what I did before, or that it wasn't sinful, but that from the time we began seeing each other, I've conformed to the kind of behavior you would expect."

"And the other thing?"

I smiled, "I am absolutely sure that I will love feeling your very sexy, very naked body against mine and that I will enjoy every moment of our very passionate lovemaking!"

"How can you know?"

"Do you want to do it with me?"

"Obviously!"

"And you want to make me feel good?"

"Yes, of course."

"And you believe I want to make you feel good?"

"I do."

"Then..." I said with a grin.

Elizaveta smiled slyly, "Then perhaps a demonstration is in order!"

"And thereby violate my word, which I gave to you, Father Nicholas, and the bishop, not to mention implied to your parents and grandparents."

"Now you're just being mean!" she protested, but she couldn't help smiling.

"So am I, or am I not, supposed to keep my word?" I asked with a grin.

"You are," she sighed. "But I have this desire..."

I nodded, "Yes..."

She was quiet for a moment, then her eyes grew wide, "And it might, eventually, lead ME to be tempted to make the same error you did."

"You'll forgive me if I don't agree or disagree with that statement out of fear for my life," I replied with a grin.

Elizaveta laughed, "I didn't say I would, just that I would be tempted. But that is where it starts, isn't it?"

"It is. And that's the thing we always have to guard against. And I'm not just talking about sexual temptation, but all kinds. And do you know the one which is most dangerous?"

"It's not sex?"

I shook my head, "No, it's pride. Pride is insidious because it's difficult to detect, and false humility is just another aspect of pride."

"Which is why the priest's prayer has him say that he is the 'chief among sinners' -- so that he never forgets that."

"Yes, and why we say the penitential prayers publicly all throughout Great Lent, and why we recite Psalm 50 more than any other, and why we have public confession, though mostly it's done so only the priest can hear, but normally where the congregation can see."

"But how do we know if our humility is real or not?" Elizaveta asked.

"By looking into our own hearts and trying to divine our motives. It's not an easy thing to do, and that's where questioning by the priest during confession, as well as your relationship with your spouse enters."

"I'm supposed to help you stay humble?"

I chuckled, "I'm pretty sure my grandfather thinks that's my grandmother's role in life! And I'm absolutely sure Mr. Zhuravlyov believes that! And, as Mr. Sokolov said, God gives us wives to help us be better men."

"And you really, truly believe that?"

"I do," I replied firmly. "I need you, as my wife, to help me be complete and to help me be a better man, a good deacon, and a good doctor. I believe that with all my heart."

"What about love?"

"That comes with time," I replied. "Were you in love with me when you asked me to marry you?"

"No."

"And now?"

"I think we're working on it like Father Nicholas and Matushka Natalya said."

"I agree. Being 'in love' with someone is very different from loving them. It's the distinction between «érōs» and «agápē»."

"I remember hearing that both in Sunday School and during the homily."

"Same here. And honestly, loving someone is much harder than being in love with them. You know the verse I'm referring to, right?"

She smiled, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church."

"And, in my opinion, that is the more challenging marriage commandment from Paul in Ephesians. I've found 'obedience' is easy -- I listen to what my bishop says, and I do it. That's much easier than loving someone such that I would die for them."

"That's how I want you to love me," Elizaveta said.

"And it's how I want to love you," I confirmed.

XL. Not Out Of The Woods

December 30, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Sunday, after church, Clarissa, Elizaveta, and I went to Tasha's apartment to spend the afternoon with her and Nik. Tasha and Elizaveta prepared dinner together and had a quiet conversation in Russian while Nik, Clarissa, and I talked. From their body language, I got the impression that «бабушка» (*babushka*) Natalya was giving Matushka Elizaveta advice. My first thought was that I should be very afraid, but that thought was fleeting, and I realized that if there was anyone on the entire planet who could help Elizaveta at this point, it was Tasha.

When Nik excused himself to use the bathroom, Clarissa leaned close.

"Worried?" she asked with a smirk.

"Why? I can't think of a better person for Elizaveta to talk to!"

"You don't think they're plotting against you?"

I chuckled, "I'm sure they are, but whatever the plot is, it can only be to my benefit."

"You're whipped!" Clarissa teased. "And you haven't even had the «пизда» (*pizda*)!" ("pussy")

"Lissa!" I whispered harshly, but I was laughing.

"What's so funny, husband?" Elizaveta asked from where she was standing by the stove.

"Just a silly joke Clarissa made, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*); nothing to worry about."
("Kitten")

"Ignore them!" Tasha said. "Those two are complete goofballs around each other!"

They turned back to working on dinner.

"Rescued," Clarissa whispered.

Nik returned, which meant Clarissa's teasing had to end. Dinner was ready about fifteen minutes later, and once we'd eaten, Elizaveta said 'good night', and we left so I could drive her home, leaving Clarissa with Tasha and Nik, with a plan to pick her up on the way back to Doctor Blahnik's house.

"What was Clarissa teasing you about?" Elizaveta asked as we got into my car.

"You and Tasha conspiring against me," I replied, starting the engine.

"We weren't!" Elizaveta protested.

I put the car into gear and headed towards Elizaveta's house.

"Relax," I replied lightly. "She was teasing. I told her I couldn't think of a better person from whom you could get advice!"

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it? Tasha is faithful, traditional, and intelligent. I very much doubt she could give you bad advice, not to mention I don't believe it's possible to prevent a Russian woman from becoming a «бабушка» (*babushka*). It's simply a natural feature of the universe!"

"You want to prevent that?"

"Not at all! If I didn't want my wife to be a «бабушка» (*babushka*), I'd have asked a non-Russian girl to marry me and done my best to keep her away from the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*), if it were possible, which I don't think it is! And honestly, I'd much rather you got advice from Tasha than any of the actual grandmothers!"

"And why is that?"

"Because you're more of a modern girl, which, by the way, is what I want. Tasha knows the struggles of living a traditional life while having more modern sensibilities."

"Too modern, in some ways," Elizaveta said quietly.

I suppressed a sigh at the realization that we weren't out of the woods just yet, and it wasn't clear if we could even SEE the edge of the woods. Elizaveta was trying, but she was still struggling. I had to tread carefully, but I couldn't be too careful, or we might not resolve the situation in a way that let us be together.

"Is this going to be a problem between the two of you?" I asked.

"No," Elizaveta said. "It's just as traditional and proper as she is..."

"You wonder why she behaved the way she did? The only way to know is to ask her."

"But that's a totally private thing! You even said so!"

"Yes, I did. But perhaps, in this case, it's necessary."

"I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable asking her about such a private thing! And why would she talk to me about it?"

"Because she loves me and wants us to be happy!"

"And you love her, too?"

"Yes, of course, but it's Christian love. She's engaged to Nik, and you and I are betrothed."

"And Clarissa, do you love her?"

"I do. And yes, she loves me."

"And me? Do you love me?"

"I do, but I believe our love at this point is a mere hint of our love in the future, the way our kisses are mere hints of our future physical love."

"I wish we could marry sooner!" she said, her voice full of desire.

"We still have work to do, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I said. ("Kitten")

"Because of your improper behavior."

"Yes. But we both want to get through this, and we'll work together to do it."

"Yesterday, I thought everything was fine..." she sighed.

"It is fine," I replied. "This is just our first major test. There will be more, though, of a different character."

"Because of your medical training?"

"Yes, and because of the demands of our church ministry. Life will be difficult at times and a real struggle, but I believe we are both strong enough to overcome any obstacles that Satan throws in our way."

"I don't think I've ever heard you place blame on Satan before."

"Because I don't! I'm perfectly capable of sinning on my own, and my temptations come from within. I don't need Satan's help to mess up!"

"Why mention him, then?"

"As a metaphor for challenges and temptations that will come our way."

"You don't believe Satan is real?"

"This conversation stays strictly between us?"

"Yes, of course!"

"I think Satan, like the snake in the garden, is the personification of our own weaknesses and the temptations of the flesh. And also, in a way, of our own consciences."

"What? How so?"

"Think about how Satan is depicted in the Book of Job -- he's more 'prosecuting attorney' as opposed to an incarnation of evil. He accuses Job of not REALLY being faithful and states that if God treats Job like crap, Job will renounce God. Satan makes all sorts of accusations and ramps up the tests, basically telling God to keep pouring it on, and Job will stumble and fall. Job comes through it like a champ, though the ending kind of messes things up because it makes everything great for Job, and it's really his wife who suffers the most."

"What?! Why do you say that?"

"Think about all the bad stuff that happened, including losing her entire family. She's not young, obviously, and after all the bad stuff happens, she has to have seven MORE kids! Would you want to have seven kids in your sixties?"

Elizaveta laughed, "I never thought about that!"

"And people wonder why she said 'Curse God and die!' when the troubles began!" I chuckled. "Her advice wasn't actually all that far off from that of Job's alleged friends who felt that adversity was punishment from God. Remember, though, that only God and Satan knew about the bet, as it were. Job, his wife, and friends were simply observing what had happened. It's also possible that the underlying Hebrew word might mean 'bless' because it's mostly used that way in the rest of the Old Testament."

"Wait! How would that make sense?"

"Think about how badly Job and his wife had suffered -- loss of family, house, and wealth. Perhaps she's telling him to give a final blessing before he dies from the terrible skin disease he had contracted. Think of how we use 'Lord have mercy!' which is both a prayer and a way of saying that something is terrible. In any event, Job's response is still the same -- not to despair and not to give up hope."

"I've never heard that!"

"When I read the Bible in High School, I was always looking at what it was trying to tell me, not what other people said. I did my own research, and often, what I found was that the Church Fathers wrote about these alternate understandings. And neither interpretation goes against Orthodox teaching. The only question is the character of Job's wife's despair."

"So, is Satan real or not?"

"Of course he's real. But 'real' doesn't mean he has horns, wears a red suit, and carries a pitchfork! More likely, he's wearing a \$500 suit and looks like the District Attorney!"

Elizaveta laughed, "Because of what is written in Job?"

"But also how he's described in Genesis in the Garden of Eden -- he's asking questions and challenging God. And how he appears in the Gospels when he tempts and challenges Jesus. Whatever the truth about Satan or Lucifer, the REAL problem is our own weakness and proclivity to sin. The word 'satan' basically means 'accuser', so when the Scriptures say 'we have an advocate' in reference to Jesus, it all fits neatly together."

"So you're saying that the real temptations come from within us?"

"Yes. Whatever happens in the world, good or bad, it's our response that matters. Remember what happened in the Garden of Eden -- a whole lot of finger-pointing. And who was Adam blaming?"

"God, of course. Father Nicholas has pointed that out many times. Eve blamed Satan, well, the serpent."

"And we don't get to hear HIS side of the story there, but if you look at the other evidence from the Bible, it's what I said -- he accuses. Think about what we do know about what happened."

"The serpent accused God of hiding things from Adam and Eve."

"So..." I prompted.

"It's the same thing as with Job or Jesus! All he does is, well, act like a troublemaker!"

"And we, because of our own weaknesses, get into trouble. It's like seeing a juicy steak during Lent -- the steak, by itself, isn't good or bad. It's you choosing to eat it when you know you shouldn't because of your fasting rule that is the problem."

"Are you talking about yourself?"

"Obviously."

"Does Tasha know she's a steak?" Elizaveta asked mirthfully.

"Ask her," I chuckled. "But you see my point, right?"

"That we can't blame Satan or God, but only ourselves."

"Which is the point of confession, right? To admit where we have fallen short and to seek the counsel and wisdom of the Church to do better in the future, aided by the power of the Eucharist. And you know that for the faithful, repentant Christian, it is the medicine of immortality, while for the unrepentant,

it is pure poison. In that way, it's like God's love -- a refining fire to those who love him; pure torture to those who do not."

"I remember that from Sunday School and Father's homilies. But why ask me to keep this conversation private?"

"There are people for whom the mere suggestion that Satan is not the Devil of popular culture creates a stumbling block."

"But what do you believe?"

"Again, between you and me, I think the only important thing is the lessons which the Bible teaches. With few exceptions, the stories don't need to be literally true for the lessons to be learned, and often, the 'truthfulness' of the story gets in the way of the lesson. I'll give you an example -- what is the most important thing about Didymus?"

"That Jesus appeared to him so he would believe, but said those who believed without seeing were blessed."

"Yes, that's what's reported to have happened, but the most important lesson there is found in Mark's Gospel. Jesus told the father of a young man who was possessed by a demon that everything is possible for one who believes. The man replied to Jesus -- 'I do believe; help my unbelief'. And there is also a lesson in John's Gospel with the story of 'Doubting Thomas', to whom Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed', but not as a rebuke. The lesson there to learn is that doubting is OK. It shouldn't cause you despair."

"Do you doubt?"

"All the time," I replied. "It's a function of being a scientist -- you question everything, then look for answers to those questions. The entire scientific method

is based on forming a hypothesis, then seeking to disprove that hypothesis. If you can't, you accept it as provisionally true. Everything, including things we know as 'facts' or 'laws of physics', can be challenged."

"But if it's a 'law', doesn't it have to be true?"

"Insofar as it accurately reflects our observations of God's creation, yes. Take, for example, Newton's Laws -- they accurately describe how the visible world works, and yet, at the quantum level, they don't. Not to mention things like gravity, which we can describe only from effects because we have no idea what it actually is, how it works, or if it's even a thing."

"Wait! Gravity exists! I know it does!"

"Because if you drop something, it falls to the ground? You're observing the effect, not the cause. We don't know how it operates, other than we have observed that something about mass attracts other masses, with a force proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. But are there gravitons? Gravity waves? Or is it just a curvature in space-time? How fast is it?"

"How fast?"

"Nobody knows for sure exactly how fast it is. In other words, what would happen if the Sun disappeared? Would its gravitational attraction fail instantly? Or would it take some amount of time? Maybe eight minutes, if gravity travels at the speed of light. But it could be more, or less, or instant. Maybe it moves faster than the speed of light by going through a different dimension, kind of like 'subspace' in *Star Trek*. Maybe the curvature of space simply vanishes instantly. Maybe it snaps back like a trampoline. We simply don't know."

"But how do you do science, then?"

"By accepting hypotheses for which there is evidence and no counter-evidence, or at least the evidence is far stronger than the counter-evidence. It's like diagnosing a disease with what's called 'differential diagnosis' -- you look at symptoms and rule out possibilities until you're left with the one that is most likely true. In some cases, a test will definitively prove things by finding a virus or some other specific proof, but not always. Sometimes, you just have to treat the symptoms because you don't know."

"Weird. I thought they could just give tests and know."

"I learned that wasn't true when I first started reading about being a doctor and about how to practice medicine when I was in Junior High. As one of the books said, it's important to remember that medicine is at least as much an art as it is a science. Going back to the gravity issue, are you planning to take chemistry and physics?"

"Biology and anatomy are the only required science classes if you aren't planning to go to college."

"You should take both chemistry and physics," I replied. "And calculus, too."

"That would mean not taking Home Ec," she replied.

"I think you could teach that class!"

"Perhaps," she laughed. "You really think I should take those science classes? And more math?"

"I do. In addition to knowledge being good in and of itself, you'll learn about the scientific method, and you'll be able to understand more about what I do. And you never know, you might decide to go to college someday."

"Why?"

"Because even if you elect to be a stay-at-home mom, knowledge is important, both for its own sake and for some potential use in the future, even if it's limited to helping the kids with their homework. I really want you to sign up for those classes."

"Then I will," she agreed as I pulled into the driveway.

We got out of the car, and I walked Elizaveta to the door in the lightly falling snow. We exchanged a soft kiss, and after she'd gone into the house, I got back in my car and headed to Tasha's apartment. When I arrived, Nik had left, and Tasha and Clarissa were talking and laughing.

"This is FAR more dangerous than the earlier conversation," I quipped.

"You think I'm giving bad advice?" Tasha asked, her eyes narrowing.

"It all depends on your definition of 'bad'," I grinned. "Ask my grandfather's opinion!"

"As if the opinions of the old men matter?!"

"And you women wonder why they drink so much vodka?" I asked, shaking my head.

"You never complained about me!" Tasha protested.

"Not to your face, anyway," I teased.

"You!" she growled but then laughed with Clarissa and me.

"Tasha, Elizaveta may ask you about certain decisions you made."

"Why?"

Clarissa replied before I could.

"Elizaveta is trying to come to grips with certain aspects of Mike's past," she interjected.

"Nik has the same struggles," Tasha replied. "But for him, I don't think talking to you is a good idea, Mike."

"No, I'd say not," I agreed. "I received a gift he felt was rightfully his."

"It was NOT," Tasha declared firmly. "It was mine to give to whomever I wanted!"

"Mike didn't say it was Nik's, Tasha," Clarissa said, beating me to a reply again. "He said that's what Nik thought."

"Probably similar to my dad and your dad," I offered. "My concern for Elizaveta and Nik is that they carry their feelings forward into both of our marriages. And that could lead to some very rocky times ahead."

"I think Nik will be OK. He assumes it was you, and other than giving you a dirty look the first time he saw you after I told him I wasn't a virgin, he hasn't said or done anything."

"Which doesn't mean he won't harbor a grudge or, in Elizaveta's case, worry that I'll stray."

"THAT is her concern?" Tasha asked. "Seriously? The last person on planet Earth who would cheat on his wife is YOU!"

"Janey," I replied.

"But you weren't cheating because we weren't betrothed or even steady. And that's my OWN fault for not extracting an additional promise from you!"

Clarissa laughed, "She has a point, Petrovich! If you can keep your promise not to have sex with a girl who DEMANDS you make love to her, and after whom you had lusted for years, keeping your promise to only have sex with your young, nubile wife should be a piece of cake!"

"I actually demanded that he...well, you know!" Tasha smirked.

Both Clarissa and I laughed.

"In general, I agree," I said. "But think about it from Elizaveta's position -- she knows you and I were courting, and I was sleeping with other girls."

"Sleeping?" Tasha asked with an arched eyebrow. "You most certainly were NOT 'sleeping'!"

"Sure I was," I smirked. "After!"

"He's a pig, isn't he?" Clarissa asked.

"I don't have much room to talk," Tasha replied with a silly smile. "But I think I understand the point. I'm not sure I could talk to her about that because she believes, correctly, that I shared your bed. Maybe Clarissa could do it, because that's not possible with her."

Clarissa turned her head slightly and we exchanged a quick look. I gave her silent permission to speak if she chose to do so.

"It's not 'impossible', Tasha," Clarissa said.

"Yes, fine, you're a girl, but you like girls."

"I like Petrovich, too," Clarissa said, her tone indicating precisely what she meant.

"You? But..." Tasha protested.

"I wanted to marry him," Clarissa said. "But I knew it might be a problem, so..."

"Does Elizaveta know?"

I shook my head, "No. Only two people besides you and my therapist know."

"When did this happen?" Tasha asked, her eyes narrowing.

"After you and I were together," I replied.

"But, if you could, then..."

"I like girls, Tasha," Clarissa said. "The physical parts work, but it was strange, and I think it would always be strange. Consider you being with a girl, one you loved dearly."

"I can't!" Tasha declared. "That's dis...uhm, sorry."

"And there's the answer to your question," Clarissa said. "I could LET it happen, but it's not what I need from a physical relationship. As much as I love Mike,

having sex with him on a regular basis just isn't something I think I could do. We tried on two separate occasions, and that convinced me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I am a lesbian. I'll never, ever have sex with a man again. On the other hand, I most certainly WILL have sex with a girl! I'm going to move in with Abby as soon as I graduate."

"You didn't like it?"

"That's not quite accurate," Clarissa said. "I had physical pleasure and a strong emotional bond with Mike, but it just felt wrong. It would be like, and please forgive me, you and I, as close friends, pleasuring each other. You might feel good, but it would feel very wrong."

"But I could never do that, no matter how much I liked a girl!"

"Then you understand. It took a supreme effort on my part to do it with Mike. He knows the struggle, but I HAD to find out, for sure."

"And you would have converted? And all the other things?"

"We would have had to have a very, very long talk about ordination. I think I agree with you on that issue, as did Lara. And, unless I miss my guess, I think the only girl Mike knows who might have been able to handle it, is Becky. Well, Angie if it wasn't for her illness. She was the perfect girl for Mike."

"Not Jocelyn?"

"Jocelyn might have done it because it's what Mike wanted, but it would have been supremely difficult for her."

"Angie is certainly the girl you should have married, Mischa," Tasha said, "but I understand why that wasn't possible. How is she?"

"She's managing," I replied. "She's taking classes and working and doing things with her friends, though in a very controlled manner. She's still on anti-depressants, which cause their own difficulties."

"And there's no cure?"

"Not that anyone knows of. They don't even understand the basic mechanism of schizophrenia, and it can only be controlled, not cured. In Angie's case, so long as she doesn't get depressed, it doesn't affect her too badly. Once she gets depressed, then it takes complete hold of her, and she needs antipsychotics to bring her back to what is 'normal' for her, but she still needs to take anti-depressants which help her be stable."

"That's just terrible," Tasha said.

"It is," I agreed. "And to be honest, I did consider marrying her. The problem is, her condition makes intimacy impossible. If that weren't the case, I would have asked her to marry me years ago."

"You preferred her to me?" Tasha asked.

"I'm actually not sure how to answer that question," I replied. "And I'm not avoiding giving an answer because I'm afraid you'll be upset. I think, given everything that happened, she showed me she would be the perfect wife for me, and we did literally everything together for an extended period of time. They called her 'Mrs. Loucks' in the dorm with good reason. The one thing we didn't do was anything physical, save one good kiss, which caused her to freak out. After that, it was only hugs and kisses on the cheek."

"They prayed together, went to church together, ran together, ate together, studied together, and spent a lot of free time together," Clarissa said. "Please

don't take this the wrong way, but you simply weren't available and she knew exactly how to achieve her goal, even if she couldn't take that last step, the one you made Mike promise to stop you from taking."

"I was foolish! I could have had Mike as a lover for four years instead of four months!"

"Right, because I would have made love to you when you were fourteen!"

Tasha smirked, "I had something you wanted VERY badly! And you were only sixteen then! Two years isn't anything. You would have done it with me if I'd offered."

"True," I agreed with a grin.

"And you had something I wanted just as badly!" Tasha added. "Only I was afraid at that point."

"Mike," Clarissa said, "I thought you and Elizaveta had talked this out."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean she's accepted it in a way that it won't rear its ugly head at some point in the future. We talked on the way to her house tonight, and I think it's clear she's not there just yet. And that made me think about Nik, which is why I said something when I came back here."

"I suppose I should talk to him," Tasha said, "but I worry that bringing it up again will cause the problem you're trying to avoid."

"You have to consider whether or not it's a good idea," I said. "You might want to say something to Father Nicholas."

"Won't that cause you trouble?"

"I think Father Nicholas won't be surprised. I confessed, though obviously I didn't give names."

"I'll have to think about it."

"OK. Lissa, are you ready to head back?"

"Sure."

We said 'good night' to Tasha, exchanged hugs with her, and then Clarissa and I left the apartment. We walked to my car, got in, and headed back to Doctor Blahnik's house, where we joined Doctor Blahnik and Derek in front of the fireplace and shared a bottle of wine. When they went up to bed, Clarissa and I stayed in the great room by the fireplace.

"Why confess to Tasha?" I asked.

"Partly to make a point to her, and partly because that way the three of us can speak freely in the future. No matter how close you become with a guy in the future, you won't be able to discuss this issue with anyone except me or Tasha. It's better to have it out in the open now. Well, at least insofar as Tasha is concerned."

"I hadn't thought about that," I replied. "But I also think it has to be resolved before May. Well, probably by the end of March at the latest."

"How will you know?"

"I have to trust Elizaveta to be honest with me. If she's not, this will actually be the LEAST of our troubles."



December 31, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday morning, I shoveled the walk and decided that a run was out of the question because about five inches of snow covered the sidewalks. I went back inside, took a quick shower to warm up, then read the newspaper until Clarissa woke up. We had breakfast together, then decided to take a walk despite having to trudge through the snow. We limited our walk to once around two blocks, then went inside where I built a fire while Clarissa made hot chocolate.

"What are we doing today?" she asked when she handed me a mug.

"I'm all yours until it's time for me to go to dinner at Elizaveta's house."

"You WISH!" Clarissa teased.

"Given I meant we'd spend time together and YOUR mind went right to sex..." I replied smugly.

"Yeah, yeah," Clarissa replied dismissively.

"And speaking of that, you haven't seen Abby since you came back."

"We're going to dinner tonight while you're at Elizaveta's. I figured that you needed me, so I just kept the same plans with Abby we made before I left."

"Which I greatly appreciate, but I don't want to interfere with your relationship with her."

"We both have a balancing act, and it's not just our relationship but everything else involved in medical school and Residency. Something will have to give in each and every part of our lives to balance it all out."

"Which is what has always concerned me -- medical training is jealous and brooks no god before it. It's worse than the Biblical God because at least He's forgiving and allows you to confess, repent, and restore your relationship. That's not the case for med school or Residency -- if you fail at any stage, you're done."

"I thought we cured you of that disease!" Clarissa protested.

"You cured me of *obsessing* about it; there is no cure for actually having to do it. Do you remember that girl in Indianapolis?"

"The soulless automaton who was first in her class but had no life and no friends? Jessica, I think."

"Yes. I don't want to be her. I was certainly on my way to being her, but you and other friends conducted an intervention. But all that did was turn me into a semi-normal person; it didn't change the facts about medical training."

"Semi-normal is generous."

"Ha-ha."

"Sadly, I think you're right. I probably should talk that over with Abby before too long."

"I'd say, though, as a nurse, she probably has a good idea."

"Probably, but you're right about talking to her."

"You don't want to mess that up."

"I suppose not," Clarissa sighed.

"What's wrong, Lissa?" I asked.

"Despite what I said to Tasha last night, I still wonder if we made the right decision."

"We did," I said firmly. "You can't deny who you are, and if you were to try, it would end very badly."

"How did you become the logical, practical one?"

"I always was, Lissa; I was just ridiculously naïve. The last three-and-a-half years have changed me in ways I never would have expected and probably would have rejected had someone told me this would be the result."

"Why?"

"Because this is not the life I imagined I'd have, or anything close to it! Jocelyn is a friend, but not super-close; my best friend in the world is a lesbian; my two closest male friends are gay; a score of lovers including quite a few casual encounters; the girl I'm in love with and wanted to marry suffers from a mental illness; I'm marrying and being ordained before med school. And that doesn't even take into account the trouble with my sister or Dean Parker."

"Don't forget learning to play the guitar, helping me come out, helping Angie and your sister, and having your music instructor suggest an assignation! But Mike, most of what you said isn't bad!"

"I didn't say it was! I said that I'd have been scared out of my mind if I'd known that was what my future looked like. That said, I could certainly have done without the problems with Jocelyn, Liz, Angie, and Dean Parker."

"And that would have made you a very different person. Don't get me wrong, but change a few of those, and suddenly, we never find each other."

"I know. I'm not regretting the last three-and-a-half years, just marveling at what they entailed."

"What do you regret? I mean," Clarissa smirked, "besides missing out on the bath and glass of wine with the sexy music professor?"

"I had her daughter instead," I chuckled. "And given how that progressed, I don't regret my relationship with her."

"And the threesome?"

"Let's just call it a failed experiment," I replied. "It was probably necessary, in the grand scheme of things."

"Opening your eyes?"

"I suppose that's the best way to put it."

"What do you regret? I'm guessing how things fell apart with Jocelyn, right?"

"Except that without that, I wouldn't be who I am. She knew that, which was what she was trying to tell me all along. Had I not been so dense, maybe we could have found a way through. The accident just made it impossible. Well, no, it made it more difficult than we were able to handle."

"You don't believe in the 'no-win scenario'?"

"Captain Kirk didn't, at least until he was actually faced with one. And I played enough chess to know that it's possible to get into 'zugzwang'."

"I don't know that word."

"It means 'compelled to move'. It applies when it's your move, and any move you make weakens your position. That's a reverse of the usual situation where when it's your turn to move, you can find a move which improves your position, or at least doesn't worsen it."

"Sorry for interrupting your train of thought."

"It derailed LONG ago," I grinned. "Anyway, I think you and I both know we'll encounter some situation in our careers where we only have bad options. Doctor Evgeni told me that sometimes, the best option is to do nothing. In chess, you can't do that, or you forfeit. But in medicine, 'wait and watch' is actually a legitimate course of action."

"That actually makes sense."

"But can you imagine how difficult that might be? Every instinct will be to honor the family's request to 'do something' and your own inclinations to want to act. I learned something about that when Jocelyn and I had our problems. The right course of action was, literally, 'wait'. And you know how I struggled with that."

Clarissa nodded, "I do. Speaking of Jocelyn, she and Bill are supposed to be here tonight, right?"

"Yes. And Dale and Marie."

"I guess they really did hit it off!"

"At least insofar as they both like sex," I chuckled.

"And you don't?"

"Oh, I do, but you know I have significant concerns with my own promiscuity, even without taking Elizaveta's opinions into account."

"You can't beat yourself up for that forever, Petrovich!"

"I know. And if it weren't for Elizaveta, I would have put it all behind me. That's the whole point of confession and absolution; well, at least after I could finally control my urges."

"I'm curious..."

I shrugged, "At the moment, I have pretty much zero desire. My libido gauge is pegged on empty."

"You can actually do that?"

"So it would seem. But it's not something I'd want to try to do for the rest of my life."

"Nearly a year without sex after getting it very, very regularly? I'm not sure I could do that."

"I wasn't sure I could, either, but I gave my word to Lara and then to Elizaveta."

We spent the rest of the day relaxing, though I did get out my guitar and practice for an hour, as I'd be giving a mini-concert at the party that evening. Just after

4:00pm, Clarissa and I left the house so I could take her to Abby's and then head to Elizaveta's. As we walked down the sidewalk towards my Mustang, I heard a voice call from behind me.

"Well, if it isn't the faggot-lover!"

I turned to see the older man who had accosted me when I was leaving the courthouse. I had no desire to debate him, and after Clarissa and I exchanged a quick look, we continued along the sidewalk to my car.

"You aren't going to turn kids from our church into faggot lovers!" he declared. "We won't allow it!"

I was sure he was talking about Mark and Alyssa, but they had been at church for Nativity and on Saturday and Sunday, so whatever he was talking about certainly hadn't stopped them from coming to church. I decided it was still the best course of action to simply ignore him, so I unlocked the passenger door of my car and helped Clarissa in. Once she was settled, I shut the door and started towards the driver's side, but the man stepped in front of me.

"I'm talking to you!" he said, his face red.

I stepped to the side and was thankful that he didn't move to block me. Clarissa had reached over to unlock the door, so I opened it, grabbed my brush from the back seat, and brushed the overnight snow from my windshield and back window, ignoring his repeated demands that I answer him. When I finished, I got into the car, shut the door, put on my seat belt, and put the key in the ignition. The man stepped out into the street, standing by the left front of the car, blocking any chance I could pull away from the curb.

"Now what?" Clarissa asked.

"We wait patiently. He'll grow tired, get cold, or both, and then he'll move."

I started the car so that the engine would run, allowing the heater to warm up the car. It would take a few minutes, but we were out of the snow and wind, and even the beginnings of warm air would make us way more comfortable than the man standing in six inches of snow which the plow hadn't been able to clear away because it couldn't get too close to the cars parked along the street. I turned on the radio and sat back.

"How long do you think?" she asked.

"I'd be shocked if he stands there for more than ten minutes," I replied. "And I don't have to be to Elizaveta's until 5:00pm."

"Do you think they're going to continue their harassment?"

"I have no idea, but I do not intend to let them get under my skin. It's like teasing Liz -- I knew how to upset her, and her bad reactions made it worthwhile. So, in this case, they can play their little games, and I won't care. The guys who beat up Robby and Lee are either in the county jail or on probation, so they either can't or won't do anything. This guy is probably the dad of one of the kids who decided to take his anger out on the victims and their friends rather than deal with the real problem."

"What about Mark and Alyssa?"

"I'm guessing that is what has the church leadership in a tizzy," I replied.

"According to Mark, several people are questioning the leadership at the church. And if they're going to display this kind of obvious bigotry, that doesn't surprise me."

"You do realize that these clowns are simply acting on what is a fairly common opinion of gays and lesbians, right?"

"Sadly."

"What do you think this guy expects you to do?"

"I'm guessing he hopes I'll try to move the car, and he can claim I hit him or some such nonsense. But I'm not going to do that. We'll wait."

In the end, it was twelve minutes before the guy gave up and moved. I waited for him to be a block down the sidewalk before I carefully maneuvered the car into the street, making a U-turn so as to avoid even driving past him. I dropped Clarissa at Abby's without further incident and then headed to Elizaveta's house for dinner.

XLI. Let Me Say My Piece

December 31, 1984, McKinley, Ohio

Elizaveta greeted me at the door with a soft kiss, then took me to her father's study. She left me with him and Gennady, then went to the kitchen to put the finishing touches on the meal. I accepted a splash of brandy from Viktor, and we toasted.

"When do you head back to Harvard?" I asked Gennady.

"Wednesday afternoon," he replied.

"You know, I never asked if you had a girlfriend."

"I do. A girl who lives in Boston but who'll move here if I ask her to marry me, which I intend to do right after graduation. Her name is Anna; she's Serbian and is faithful."

"How long have you been dating?"

"Since right after the start of my Junior year. She's the daughter of one of my professors. We met at a social gathering at his house."

"I assume the wedding will be in Boston?"

"I don't see any way around that which allows me to survive," he grinned. "I'd have every woman in her church after me! And not in a good way!"

"Any idea when?"

"It would be up to her and her family, but I suspect in the Fall. We'll see. I know your schedule is going to be difficult, so I'll see what we can arrange so you can be there."

"Thanks. I'm sure Elizaveta will appreciate that as well."

"I don't want to upset HER either," he replied with a grin, "and I'd strongly advise you not to do so!"

"She does have a lot of her grandmother in her," Viktor said with a similar grin. "My mother-in-law is...strong-willed."

"Do you know many Russian women who aren't?" I asked.

"No!" they both replied.

"But some are stronger-willed than others," Viktor replied. "And my daughter is one of them!"

"Good luck, Mike!" Gennady added.

"Thanks, but I was fully aware of what I was in for once she approached me and read me the Riot Act for not paying enough attention to the girls at church, and then listing her qualifications and making quite clear not only what she wanted, but what she expected!"

"And like any wise man in an encounter with a Russian woman, he said 'Yes, Dear', and that was the end of the discussion!" Viktor said with a laugh.

"I heard that!" Elizaveta said from the doorway. "Dinner is ready."

"Yes, Dear!" I replied with a smirk she couldn't see.

"I'll wipe that smirk off your face, husband!" she declared.

"Busted," Gennady whispered.

"Yeah," I agreed, shaking my head.

The three of us got up and went to the dining room. Elizaveta gave me a hard look, but I could tell by the slightly upturned corners of her lips that she was fighting a smile. Dinner was delicious, as always, and dessert was fantastic. While the women cleaned up, Viktor, Gennady, Iosif, and I went to the living room with coffee.

"Use your best judgment about when you bring Elizaveta home tonight," Viktor said.

"Probably around 1:30am," I replied.

"That's fine."

We talked together, and about fifteen minutes later, Elizaveta came into the room and said she was ready. I said 'goodbye' to my future father-in-law and brothers-in-law, and Elizaveta and I put on our coats, hats, and gloves and headed out to my car.

"What did my dad and brother say before I came into the study?" Elizaveta asked as I pulled out of the driveway.

"Nothing I didn't already know!"

"What do you mean?"

"That you are a Russian woman, even if you haven't fully trained to be a «бабушка» (*babushka*)! Strong-willed and feisty!"

"And is that a problem?" she demanded.

"Why, no, of course not," I replied flatly.

"Clarissa and Tasha are right -- you are a goofball!"

"I also have a strong sense of self-preservation!" I chuckled.

"So long as you do as I say, we'll never have any trouble!" she teased.

"I don't believe that's the meaning of 'compromise'!"

"It is in my mind!" Elizaveta declared firmly.

"Of course it is!" I replied.

"You do know I'm teasing, right?" Elizaveta asked, her voice softening.

"Yes, and I'm teasing right back! But I do have a question."

"What's that?"

"Exactly how you intend to wipe the smirk off my face!"

"Wouldn't YOU like to know!"

"I would! And please be VERY detailed!"

"Can I be serious for a moment?"

"Yes, of course."

"I don't even know how to tease that way because I've never done anything other than kiss you, and not much of that."

"I think, given that we have almost five months before we marry, the wisest course of action is for me not to tease you in that way until we can actually do something about it."

"You have your room at Doctor Blahnik's house..." she said quietly.

"As much as I want to be with you, I don't think that's a good idea," I said gently.
"We should wait until after the marriage ceremony, as we agreed."

"Is it wrong to want to?"

"Absolutely not!" I agreed. "It's normal."

"We are betrothed..."

"Yes, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*), we are, but we also need to make sure we keep things in the correct order." ("Kitten")

"But you've done it already!" she protested.

"Yes, that's true. But for you and me, together, waiting will be worth it."

"I might explode before then!"

"Just let it build, and our wedding night will be AMAZING!"

"If I don't die first!"

"We'll have sixty or seventy years to make up for the next five months!"

"I should say you're being mean, but I know what might happen with your ordination if we did. And I want you to become a deacon."

I was SO tempted to tease her, but that actually WOULD be me being mean, so I let it go. I also savored the idea of what our wedding night was going to be like if she had all that pent-up desire. Occasional stoking of that smoldering fire would likely result in a night which put my first night with Tasha to shame. I immediately put that out of my mind because comparing was completely inappropriate, as was thinking of Tasha in that way.

We arrived at Doctor Blahnik's house and asked how we could help get things ready. Milena took Elizaveta with her to help her, while I stayed with Doctor Blahnik in the kitchen to help prepare sandwiches and other snacks.

"Trying to make a point?" I asked after Elizaveta had left.

"Who? Me?" Doctor Blahnik asked with a smile.

"Yes, you! You don't approve of traditional roles, so you sent Elizaveta to help set up the bar while I'm preparing food!"

"She is a bit heavy on the 'Suzy Homemaker' schtick."

"I know, but, if you think about the path she's chosen through life, it makes sense. And before you object, I asked her to take calculus, chemistry, and physics instead of Home Ec and what they call 'business math' for the next two years. That provides many more options after I'm done with medical school."

"Is she going to work?"

"That all depends on the timing of kids. At a minimum, she needs to graduate before we have our first. That takes me at least through the first two years of medical school. After that, we'll see. The thing to remember is that this is the path she's chosen, and it dovetails nicely with the path I've chosen. But I won't do anything to discourage her from working or going to college if that's what she wants to do."

"I take it you're planning more than one child?"

"Yes, we are. How many we have is up to her, really. My part is pretty easy," I added with a smirk.

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "Yes, at the start, but I can't imagine you not being very involved in your kids' lives."

"Of course! But we have several years as a couple first, something I think is very important, especially given her age."

"I take it she's not staying the night?"

"No. I'll leave around 1:00am to take her home and come right back."

We finished in the kitchen just as the first guests started to arrive. Dale and Marie arrived soon after that, and by 8:00pm, the party was in full swing. It was a fun evening -- I played my guitar and sang, socialized, and danced, though I was careful not to dance too close to any girls except for Elizaveta, and even with her, I was careful so as not to increase our temptation. Just before midnight, Milena, Joel, Derek, and I filled champagne glasses, and Doctor Blahnik led the toast

when the clock struck midnight. Elizaveta and I exchanged a soft kiss, and about an hour later, I took her home.



January 1, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"When did you learn to play *Born to Run*?" Clarissa asked when we ate a late breakfast on Tuesday morning.

"I've been practicing for nearly two years. I only really became satisfied with that complex guitar riff about a month ago."

"I never heard you practice it."

"Because I only practiced that song in private. Even Doctor Blahnik hadn't heard it."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to get it right before I played it for anyone."

"Oh, you got it right, alright! I never realized strumming a guitar could make girls cum!"

I laughed, "Oh, it did not!"

"There were three girls who probably left wet spots on their chairs! But they saw Elizaveta, who looked like a lioness guarding her cub!"

"I didn't intend for that to happen."

Clarissa laughed, "This time!"

"Ancient history. And it just shows how careful I need to be. Which girls, by the way?"

Clarissa laughed even harder, "Wouldn't YOU like to know!"

"The cute redheaded theatre major and her black friend," I replied with a smirk. "And the brunette music student with short hair and major curves."

"So you DID notice!"

"All three of them angled for dances, but, as you say, Elizaveta was keeping a close watch on me."

"Did any of them succeed?"

"You KNOW that I'm a sucker for redheads! But I didn't let her dance nearly as close as she wanted to."

"Your serious sense of self-preservation kicked in."

"Obviously!"

"What's up for today?" Clarissa asked.

"Just a lazy day around the house," I replied. "Elizaveta is doing something with her mom and grandmothers. They have a New Year's Day tradition of going to a Russian tea room, and no men are invited. I was thinking of soaking in the tub."

"Speaking of things we want but can't have..." she sighed.

"That would probably be over the line."

"And cuddling?"

"I don't think Elizaveta would be happy about that. And frankly, I don't think any girl who would marry me would be happy about that unless we were talking about that weird fantasy of a bisexual girl."

"Or you and I get married."

"Lissa..."

"I know! I know! What I said to Tasha..."

"I'd say that reflects reality more than what you're thinking right now. Why?"

"Because it's actually hitting me what I have to give up. It just won't be the same."

"If what you said to Tasha is true, and I have no reason to believe it isn't, then I'm not sure what to do."

"If I could..."

"But you can't. I mean, sure, you could physically do it, but you'll be fighting yourself for the rest of your life, and that is a recipe for disaster."

"I know," she said quietly, then sighed deeply. "I know."

"Stand up," I said.

"Why?"

"Just stand up."

She did, and I took her in my arms and hugged her. That was, I felt, both the least -- and the most -- that I could do. There was no doubt in my mind that if we'd attempted what she was suggesting, it would end in tears somewhere down the road. We hugged for several minutes before she slipped from my arms, and we sat back down to finish our breakfast.

"I keep thinking maybe I could."

"Maybe?"

"I know."

"You've said 'I know' several times, but you aren't acting like you know."

"I know," Clarissa replied with a wry smile. "I'm sorry."

"Don't ever apologize for who you are, Lissa!"

"But I'm making things difficult for you!"

I smiled, "No, you're making them difficult for YOU. I love you, and I'll be here for you. And we'll still go to medical school together, do our Residencies together, and practice together."

"And Elizaveta is going to tolerate that?"

"She thinks you're the safest girl on the planet."

"And you're going to let her continue to believe that?"

"Yes, because you and I are both smart enough and strong enough to prove her right. We can do this, Lissa!"

We finished our breakfast, and after we cleaned up, we went for a walk. Neither of us spoke, and we simply enjoyed the quiet of the neighborhood blanketed in new-fallen snow. The peace and serenity were wonderful, and I was very glad not to run into whomever the man was from Tim Saddler's former church. We walked for about twenty-five minutes, then returned to the house, where we sat in front of the fire with mugs of hot chocolate.

"What does Abby think?" I asked.

"I haven't really discussed us with her beyond you being my closest friend and about you supporting me when I came out to my parents. I don't think she needs to know we made love any more than Elizaveta needs to know."

"Does she know you experimented?"

"No. I didn't see how I could bring that up without implying something you and I want to keep secret."

"But you told Tasha."

"I think Tasha is special, and I think she's going to be a good friend to both of us."

"On that, we agree. Jocelyn knows as well, obviously."

"Another girl who will be a good friend. In a way, I wish Robby and Lee were planning to stay in the area long-term, but that doesn't look likely."

"Sadly, no. But I hope to stay in touch with them when they move to wherever it is they end up."

"California," Clarissa replied. "I'll wager anything they decide to go to grad school in California, and Sophia goes with them. It's the one place that is semi-sane about the treatment of gays and lesbians."

The doorbell rang then, and Doctor Blahnik was up, so she went to answer it. She walked into the great room a minute later, and by the surprised look on Clarissa's face, I knew something strange was happening.

"Mike, you have a visitor," Doctor Blahnik said as I turned towards her.

"Angie?!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you," she replied, her voice clear and strong, as it had been when we'd first met.

"Is your mom with you?"

"No. I came alone."

Which meant she had driven, something she wasn't supposed to do.

"Does your mom know you're here?"

"No. Can we talk, please?"

"Use my study, Mike," Doctor Blahnik offered.

I nodded and got up, and Angie followed me to Doctor Blahnik's study. We sat down in two comfortable chairs, which were side by side but slightly angled towards each other.

"Ang," I said gently, "you know you aren't supposed to drive. And your mom is supposed to know where you are."

"I know you care about me and are concerned, but can we just set that aside for now, please?"

"OK," I replied. "What did you want to talk about?"

"The future; what I want and how I can achieve it."

"Have you talked about this with Doctor Mercer?"

Angie smiled, "Yes, but we don't agree. Will you just let me say what I came to say, and then I'll go."

I wasn't sure it was a good idea, but I didn't see any way except to let her say what she intended to say, though I was uncomfortable both with what I expected to hear and with her driving home. I didn't want to upset her, either.

"OK. Go ahead."

"For the last year, I've been working, going to church, taking classes, and living a normal life. You know, there are three things I wanted -- to be a teacher, to marry, and to have children. But I have a condition which has made me unstable and interfered with my goals. But I learned to live with my condition and to control it without drugs, except for antidepressants.

"But you see, I think I only need those because of my despair over the future. I don't think it has to be that way. I think, with the right man and the right circumstances, I can have those things -- a teaching job, a husband, and children. You know I love you with every fibre of my being, and I know you love me, too.

I also know you're betrothed to Elizaveta, but I had to tell you all of this because I want to be with you, Mike. I'm ready to be with you in every way.

"That's all I had to say. All I wanted was for you to hear what I had to say face-to-face so you could know that I'm perfectly rational and perfectly capable of being who I want to be. I know I've put you in a difficult situation, and I know you're probably confused. Just think about what I've said, and come see me when you're ready to talk. And now that I've said my piece, I'm going to go back home."

She stood, bent down, placed a soft kiss on my cheek, and then walked out of the room, leaving me in stunned silence. I shook my head to clear it, then got up and followed her. When she got to the front door, she turned, smiled, opened it, and walked out into the cold, snowy afternoon. I stood staring at the door, which she had closed behind her until Clarissa and Doctor Blahnik came into the foyer.

"Mike?" Clarissa asked.

I turned, shook my head, and walked back towards the great room.

"You're pale," Doctor Blahnik said. "Are you OK?"

"I'm not quite sure," I replied.

"Did you have a fight?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

I shook my head slowly, "Far from it."

"Jesus!" Clarissa breathed. "She thinks she's healthy enough to marry you! For real, this time! And she came to claim you!"

"Right the first time," I replied.

"But why did she leave?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

"I'd guess two reasons," I said thoughtfully. "First, she couldn't risk getting too emotional or having a debate because that might result in us having to call her mom or Doctor Mercer. Second, because she didn't want an automatic answer, because she knew what my answer would have to be if I was forced to answer immediately."

"What are you going to do?" Clarissa asked.

"Talk to Doctor Mercer tomorrow. I don't want to disturb her today, and I certainly don't want to cause either Doctor Mercer or Mrs. Stephens to freak out about Angie driving here alone. Well, they will freak out, but only after Angie is home safely."

"But she's taking antidepressants," Clarissa protested.

"I'm not so sure about that," I replied. "Her eyes were clear, her skin was glowing, her hair was shiny, and she sounded like the Angie I met before her mini-meltdown over our French kiss."

"Good makeup and conditioner are not signs of stable mental health! If she stopped taking her medication, you need to let someone know. Are you sure?"

I nodded, "She told me as much without directly saying it. She said she knows why she was becoming depressed, and I suspect she's right. She was depressed because she only saw a future devoid of the things she wants most from life -- teaching, marriage, and having children. The problem is, she's been in a completely managed environment with minimal stress. That's what appears to have let her stop taking the strong antipsychotics. That said, she is working,

taking classes, and seeing her friends, but all within a rigid structure. She's chafing at that, which doesn't surprise me."

"Are you actually thinking what I think you're thinking?"

"I think so," I replied with a smirk. "But, seriously, I don't know what to think right now."

"You know I mean Elizaveta."

"I'd say nothing has changed, but I know you won't believe me."

"Because it would be false! Angie just tried to put herself back in the game and did so in exactly the right way -- creating just enough doubt in your mind to get you to think about your future. Well, about changing your future."

"She drove nearly two hours each way to speak to you for five minutes?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

I nodded, "Yes, and that makes perfect sense to me. Well, in the sense that it makes sense to her."

"I wonder if, perhaps, you didn't act too hastily," Doctor Blahnik said.

I grinned, "You just want to have that glass of wine together!"

She laughed, "Be that as it may, you know my take on marrying young."

"I do. We'll just have to agree to disagree."

"Youth is SO wasted on the young!" Doctor Blahnik teased.

"Nice," I chuckled.

"Derek and I are going out, but we'll be back in time for dinner. Are you still planning on joining us?"

"We are," I replied.

"Good!"

She left, and Clarissa and I went back to sit by the fire. Despite my statement that I wasn't going to do anything before I talked to Doctor Mercer, there was no way I could not think about the implications of Angie's visit. My conversation with Tasha rang in my ears -- I'd said I was in love with Angie and had even confirmed that to Elizaveta and agreed Angie was the girl I would have married had she not had her condition.

"Troubled?" Clarissa asked after ten minutes of silence.

"Good call," I replied. "Angie said that I'm the guy who can give her the future she wants."

"And you feel you'd be letting her down if you didn't try?"

"The 'old' Mike would have; the 'new' Mike is concerned that she thinks that way. It's complicated, but I'd say I feel like this is part of her obsession with me."

"But you're concerned about what will happen if you turn her down."

"Obviously, but that doesn't mean I'm going to act foolishly or precipitously. Or that I'm going to change my intentions."

"No, but she has you thinking about it, which appears to have been her goal. And, to be honest, it feels like how she was controlling you before her meltdown."

"You know, I never believed she was controlling. And if you think about it, the only thing she really did was try to rein in my sexual activity. And to be frank, I think she was right about that. Otherwise, what did she do? Pray and go to church with me? Run with me? Spend time with me? I wanted all of those things and more. That's hardly controlling. You may not believe it, but she had my best interest at heart."

"You're contradicting yourself now, Petrovich -- if she had her way, you wouldn't have changed in the ways you admitted you needed to."

"Perhaps not as radically, but I would have changed. After all, I would have had the same friends, and you and I would still have developed our close relationship."

"Would we have?"

"Maybe we wouldn't have made love, but otherwise? Angie never got in the way."

"But would a NORMAL Angie have gotten in the way? She only encouraged you to sleep with Sandy because she couldn't."

I shrugged, "Who knows? All of that is in the past, anyway. We need to deal with the here and now. And I'm going to wait to talk to Doctor Mercer before I do anything, one way or the other."

"You're considering her offer?"

"I don't know what I'm doing, and honestly, I need to talk to Doctor Mercer, as I said. Can we please just drop this for now?"

"Sure. Would you play for me?"

"Will you need to change your panties?" I asked with a silly smile.

"No!" Clarissa declared, laughing. "You know I never had any physical desire in that way. And yes, before you say it, I know!"

I chuckled, "Yes, I'll play for you."

I went upstairs to my room and got my guitar and sheet music. I went back downstairs and sat on the hearth by the fireplace to play for Clarissa. I played all her favorites and finished with *Born to Run*, teasing her by staring into her eyes as I sang to her.

"That doesn't work the same," she said when I finished. "Your eyes tell me you love me, but my panties are dry."

"Gee, thanks," I deadpanned.

"Didn't we have this discussion?"

"Yes, we did. And you know I'm just teasing!"

I went upstairs to put my guitar away, and as I was coming down the stairs, the phone rang. Because Doctor Blahnik was out, I went to the kitchen to answer it.

"Blahnik residence; Mike speaking."

"Mike? It's Becky! Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year to you, too! How are you?"

"OK. You?"

"Pretty good. What's up?"

"I'm visiting your parents, and I thought you might like to have lunch and catch up?"

"Visiting? They didn't tell me!"

"I just called yesterday. Things were boring at my grandparents' house, and your dad said I could visit any time."

"How long are you going to be there?"

"I'm going home on Friday afternoon. Would Thursday work?"

I paused for a second, but given that I'd told Becky about being engaged, and from that point, our calls and letters had withered, I didn't think it was an issue.

"Sure, I should be able to do that. How about Marie's at 11:30am?"

"Great! It'll be good to see you again."

"See you Thursday."

We said 'goodbye', and I went to the great room.

"Who was on the phone?"

"Becky," I replied.

Clarissa started laughing, and it was thirty seconds before she replied.

"When it rains, it pours! The OTHER girl you said was perfect for you!"

"This is different," I replied.

"So, Petrovich, are you going to tell Elizaveta about BOTH girls?"

"Do I really have a choice? If I start keeping secrets from her, it's going to end in disaster. And before you raise the issue of you and me, I don't reveal ANY names to her."

"How much does she know about Becky?"

"Just that my family helped her when her parents got into trouble with the law. No details because I didn't feel right sharing those. Only a few people actually know."

"You think she's going to be OK with that?"

"Becky? For sure. Angie will make her VERY nervous, and I think that's justified, given everything that's been said about Angie and me."

"I'd say, especially because you were very careful not to say you weren't thinking about what Angie said."

"Obviously, I'm thinking about it. It's difficult not to."

"Don't get cute, Petrovich. It's what you didn't say. And you know what I mean."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Clarissa was right; I really WAS thinking about Angie. And that was a serious problem. All I could do was work through it, and that started with a call to Doctor Mercer.

"I know," I replied.



January 2, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Wednesday morning I was up early, went for a walk because there was too much snow on the sidewalks to run, then ate breakfast. I called Doctor Mercer just after 7:00am before anyone else was out of bed. I was fortunate to catch her in the office early and available.

"Mike? What's up?"

"Angie came to see me in McKinley yesterday and pretty much said she's ready to get married and have kids."

"She WHAT?!" Doctor Mercer asked, clearly shocked by the revelation.

"Exactly as I said."

"Who brought her? Her mom or a friend?"

"She drove herself," I admitted reluctantly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Do you know how dangerous that is?!"

"Yes, of course, but I had no idea she was coming here."

"How did she get home?"

"She drove."

"You let her drive home?!"

"Yes. She came here, spent a bit less than ten minutes telling me exactly what she wanted, then left. I was dazed because it was completely out of the blue. That said, when I asked her about your opinion, she said the two of you disagreed."

"OK, let's start at the beginning. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Well, the theory goes that there was a singularity, and some event occurred which caused it to rapidly expand, forming the universe..."

"Come on, Mike, this is serious!"

"You don't think I know that? But a bit of levity helps."

"Start with what happened yesterday when Angie arrived, please."

"Sorry. It was out of the blue, as I said. I had no idea she was going to show up. I spoke to her about a week ago, and she gave me no indication that she was contemplating anything like this. On that call, I told her she sounded good and that things seemed to be going well. Fast forward a week, and she shows up at the door unannounced. The first thing I did was ask if her mom knew she'd driven to McKinley, and Angie said 'No'. I reminded her she wasn't supposed to be driving and that she was supposed to tell her mom where she was going. She said she knew I cared and asked me to put that aside. I did, and we went to a private room to talk."

"How did she look?"

"As I said to Clarissa, Angie was basically her old self, from before the first French kiss that sent things on the slow downward spiral. Her eyes were clear, her hair shiny, her skin glowing, and her voice strong and confident. Unless I miss my guess, the way she looked and acted, combined with something she said, tells me she's not taking her antidepressants."

"What did she say?" Doctor Mercer asked, interrupting me.

"It was part of the conversation, so let me just continue the story, please. Once we were alone together, I asked her about talking to you, and she said you disagreed. I'm going to assume that means you didn't think Angie was ready for a relationship of the kind she's seeking."

"Correct. Go on."

"She said she just wanted to say her piece and then leave, and I felt it was best to listen to her. She started by pointing out how she's basically living a normal life and reminded me of her three main goals -- to be a teacher, a wife, and a mom. She acknowledged her condition had interfered with her plans but pointed out that she had learned to live with it, and it was under control except for taking antidepressants. She then said the thing that made me believe she had stopped taking them -- that she only needed, and yes, she used past tense, the drugs because of despair over her future."

"And you think that choice of grammar is indicative of her no longer taking the drugs?"

"She was way more animated and way more, pardon me, 'normal' than she has been in a long time. When she asked me to make love to her when I visited her, she was tentative, and I saw the effects of the drugs, even if they were muted."

Today, she was confident and strong. I'd bet she's either not taking them or reduced her dosage on her own."

"I suppose that's possible. She's been very good about taking her medication, so her mom doesn't watch closely the way she did originally. Go on."

"Angie reiterated what I've known for the best part of three years -- that she loves me with every fibre of her being. She also pointed out that she knows I love her as well. And, just to make the point that she's not delusional, she freely admitted that she knew I was betrothed to Elizaveta. That's when she, to use a cliché, dropped the hammer and said she wanted to be with me and that she was ready to be with me in every way.

"This was nothing like the attempt to get me to make love to her; this was a clear statement that she wanted to marry me and have kids with me. I continued to sit quietly, without saying anything, just as she requested, and she continued by saying that she had said what she came to say and that she was perfectly rational and perfectly capable of being who she wanted to be. She acknowledged that she had put me in a difficult situation because of Elizaveta, said she was sure I was confused, asked me to think about what she had said, and to come to see her when I was ready to talk. Then she left."

"You just let her go?"

"I was stunned, Doc. It all happened so quickly that I didn't know what to do. It took a few minutes for my mind to clear, and when it did, I decided I needed to talk to you."

"Why not call my emergency number?"

"Because I didn't want to upset Angie. I know I'm no professional, but in my opinion, that would have made things worse. As it is, you can simply talk to her at your next appointment."

"That's not until mid-month; I'm only seeing her once a month."

"Which tells me you think she's at least stable enough to manage her job, school, and friends."

"That's a far cry from driving a hundred miles in each direction AND from trying to have an intimate relationship."

"In the end, Doc, who decides? Did you have her driving license revoked?"

"No, because we didn't feel it was necessary. And that's not the point."

"Isn't it? Who gets to decide for Angie? You? Her mom? The State of Ohio? Or Angie? I'm pretty sure that you'd be hard-pressed to prove she was unable to care for herself and make her own decisions."

"Mike, don't start thinking that way. She's not cured."

"I'm not arguing with you, but how would you know? In other words, if she's functioning well in society and doesn't need drugs to manage her condition, then what would you call it? Remission? But how long does it have to stay in 'remission' before you would say she's free from the condition?"

"There is no cure, Mike; there is only management."

"Isn't it true that she's not diagnosable if her condition doesn't interfere with her ability to function?"

"But she was diagnosed!"

"Yes, of course. But is that now a straitjacket she wears for the rest of her life, no matter what?"

"Mike," Doctor Mercer said firmly, "you aren't an expert, and I'm concerned about what I think you're contemplating?"

"You and Clarissa both, but all I'm contemplating right now is Angie's health and happiness."

"Which she neatly tied to a relationship with you."

"Yes, and so has Clarissa. Would you say Clarissa is mentally ill?"

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "There are SO many good responses to that which professionalism forbids me from using. But you know this is different."

"Is it? Really? Clarissa has said, quite directly, that her happiness is tied to a relationship with me. And I have to say, mine is similar. If she wasn't lesbian, we'd be a couple. So, is the fact that she tied her happiness to me a real concern?"

"You know that I think it is, given the entire set of circumstances in which you find yourself. What's the saying? 'No man can serve two masters'."

"Well, I'm going to have to because of my dual callings. Not to mention, I'm betrothed to a future «бабушка» (*babushka*). In the end, medical school and Residency are my masters, no matter what else I might want. As I said to someone not long ago, medicine is a jealous god and brooks no other gods before it. It's also a very unforgiving god, with little room for forgiveness until you actually get the medical license."

"Yes, and do you think you could care for Angie while dedicating the next six or seven years to medical school and Residency? It's going to be difficult for you to care for Elizaveta, and she's not suffering from schizophrenia."

"She chose to marry me, so I suspect at least some people will question her sanity!"

"There is that," Doctor Mercer said lightly. "But you understand the point I'm making."

"I do."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have to talk to her at some point."

"Obviously. But are you really considering what she said?"

"How could I not? Once she said it, we kind of reached a point where I couldn't help but think about it. I'm basically forced into making a decision."

"I need to talk to her, Mike. Don't do anything precipitously."

"Right, because that's me, Mr. Precipitous!"

"You do usually carefully consider your actions, but not always. And you have a history of letting your heart run ahead of your brain."

"At least you acknowledge I have one!" I chuckled. "My sister would disagree, at least in the past."

"Having one and using one aren't the same thing."

"Don't get on Angie's case, Doc. It won't end well."

"That's your professional opinion?"

"That's my opinion as someone who loves her and wants her to be happy and fulfilled. When is your appointment?"

"January 10th -- a week from tomorrow."

"I think I can safely wait until after that to talk to her."

"Can you come to see me on Saturday the 12th? 9:00am?"

"I should be able to, yes."

"I'll see you then. Please don't make any decisions before then. Can you commit to that?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll see you then."

XLII. I Do Know What I Ought To Do

January 2, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Well?" Clarissa asked after I returned to the great room.

"Wait and see. Angie's next appointment is a week from tomorrow. I'm hoping Doctor Mercer waits until then to speak to Angie, but I'm afraid she'll call Angie's mom, and THAT will cause Angie all sorts of heartache and might even set off her condition."

"Wouldn't Doctor Mercer know that?"

"Yes, but the problem is that Angie did something Doctor Mercer thinks is inherently dangerous. She's almost compelled to act. But I didn't see any way around telling her. And not calling wasn't a real option because I care about Angie. I'm just afraid I've made things worse by doing the right thing."

"I see your point, but isn't that almost the perfect test -- if Angie handles it rationally and calmly, then how can anyone say she's suffering from a mental illness? If she does have a relapse, then it basically shows she's still sick."

"You're right," I replied. "But I still feel like I may have hurt more than helped."

"And your dilemma?"

"I have no idea. I keep asking myself the question, and I keep coming back to the fact that I love her."

"Have you considered how something that radical would affect things at church?"

"Oh, they'd be a complete mess, and it would very likely mean I wouldn't be ordained in August and perhaps never."

"And that's OK?"

"Didn't you say to Tasha that we would have to have had a very long conversation about ordination? That tells me the answer from you, ultimately, would have been 'no'. Do you think for one second I would have let that come between us?"

Clarissa smiled, "No, I don't, because you wouldn't."

"The problem is, no matter what I do, I'm potentially going to hurt someone very badly. And I honestly don't see a way out where that isn't the case."

"What about you, Mike? Your decision could hurt you very badly, too."

"Breaking my word?"

"Which for you would be traumatic. And I'm not arguing one way or the other right now, but you do need to count the cost of the tower you decide to build. And make sure that the foundation is on bedrock, not sand."

"You're mixing your Biblical idioms," I chuckled. "'Counting the cost' comes from Luke 14 and is about discipleship; 'bedrock versus sand' is Matthew 7 and is about heeding the teachings of Jesus."

"Whatever! You know what I'm getting at!"

"I do. And, to be brutally honest, either of those could refer to any of the three possible marriage partners."

"Three? Becky?!"

"No, you dimwit, YOU!"

"No Russian?" Clarissa asked with a smirk. "I would have expected you to use «глупец» (*glupys*)!" ("blockhead")

"In case you hadn't noticed, once things with Tasha went the way they did, I started using less and less Russian. Even with Lara, I mostly used English. If my kids speak Russian, it'll only be because Elizaveta's grandparents teach them. I'm pretty much down to using only the occasional swear word and my pet name for Elizaveta. But we're off the point.

"In each case, there is the possibility of the foundation being built on sand -- you're a lesbian; Angie has her condition; Elizaveta is very young. The question is, I guess, if there actually is any bedrock on which to build. And, I think, in each case, there is. You are my soulmate; I'm in love with Angie, and she's a faithful Orthodox girl; Elizaveta is, despite being young, a rock of stability."

"I'll have to admit that those Russian women are pretty damned strong -- Tasha, Katy, Lara, and Elizaveta."

"My sister in her own way," I added.

"I don't know that I could have gone through what she did and come out OK on the other side. You had a large part in making that happen."

"Not without a ridiculous amount of angst, drama, and heartache. And we're still not out of the woods with my dad. He's civil, but that's it."

"Which is light years ahead of where he was."

"True."

"So? Sexy redhead or nubile Russian?"

"No third choice? Gorgeous lesbian?"

"If there was a third choice, it would be one of the hot blondes -- Tasha, Katy, or Becky."

"Well, Tasha is betrothed; Katy told me she's been dating the same guy for six months; and Becky and I kind of drifted apart because of distance, and, to be honest, because I expected to be with Tasha, which Becky knew was most likely the case. Then, when things with Tasha went the way they did, Lara appeared, and then Elizaveta."

"I think I'm going to have to lean towards how I think Doctor Mercer is going to come down on this -- that any kind of commitment to Angie is risky, fraught with all kinds of problems, and could lead to true disaster for you with your twin vocations of church and medicine."

"But isn't there a chance of disaster no matter which way I decide?"

"Yes, obviously, but that's why I made the point about counting the cost. Be honest with yourself, Mike. Think back to the old Mike and what he used to say about medical school and the timing of his marriage? Can you TRULY give Angie what she needs? Can you truly be there for her? Does she understand what it means to be married to you?"

"Does Elizaveta?" I countered.

"Going back to foundations -- Elizaveta has a very strong support network and has at least acknowledged the amount of time you're going to need to spend studying and working. You'll have her mom and both grandmothers ensuring she behaves the way a proper Russian woman should -- tough as nails and able to deal with whatever life throws at her. She may be young, but she has a thousand years of collected wisdom to help her, not to mention two thousand years of Christian tradition. She has the Matushkas and Doctor Evgeni's wife to turn to as well. Now, compare that with your other option."

"If you could get over your pussy fetish, YOU could handle it!" I teased.

Clarissa laughed so hard she had to lie down on the rug in front of the fireplace. She sat up about two minutes later.

"Mike Loucks! What has gotten into you?!"

"I got into YOU, Lissa!"

"Yes, yes, of course. But you using THAT word? Wow. You have lightened up considerably. And it's NOT a fetish, you goofball!"

"Whatever!"

"I'm just saying that you need to count the cost. Do you want Angie SO badly that you'll risk everything for her?"

"Which is the very definition of «agápē» love -- self-giving love which puts the other person first."

"Even if it causes you misery?"

"I believe I've read that there is no greater love a man has than he lay down his life for his friends. And that a husband should love his wife as Christ loved the Church, even giving himself up for her."

"Sorry, but that's just irrational -- and it goes against the principle of building on bedrock! At some point, you have to look out for yourself! Even Jesus made a whip and chased the moneychangers out of the temple!"

I chuckled, "When I'm THE Son of God, I'll allow myself righteous anger."

"Right, because you weren't righteously, and rightly, angry at those clowns who attacked Robby and Lee."

"Actually, I was sad more than angry; sad that they failed to display basic Christian love and sad that they were taught to use violence to resolve their differences."

"Stop being difficult, and let me make my point!" Clarissa demanded.

"Why should I change now?" I asked with a silly grin.

"I can't WAIT to see that little Russian girl wipe that silly grin off your face!"

"She said the same thing, but the problem is, she has no clue how to tease by innuendo, so it kind of ended there with a bit of frustration on her part."

"That girl is going to be wound so tight by your wedding night that she's going to fuck you to death!"

"But what a way to go," I smirked.

"You PIG!" Clarissa exclaimed, but she was laughing.

"I do get your point, and it has to be a balancing act. One or the other of the partners being miserable or suffering isn't conducive to a healthy relationship and can lead to resentment."

"Let me guess, that was something one of your priests discussed in applying those verses."

"Exactly. There IS a time when one might be called upon to lay down one's life, but that is not the norm. Seeking martyrdom is a sin. That said, not trying to avoid it is not a sin. And it's a balancing act -- trying to preach Christianity in a Muslim country is pretty much asking for martyrdom, but we are also called to spread the Gospel. I think my way is the balanced approach -- live my life as a Christian, answer questions when people ask, and make no effort to hide that I am a Christian."

"But you wouldn't go to Iran or wherever in the first place!"

"No, I wouldn't. But I'm not called to the mission field, so I can't speak for someone who is. That would be between them and their confessor and bishop. And, generally speaking, the bishops would not encourage anyone to willfully put themselves in that kind of situation. Some people, though, are thrust into it.

"There's a story from Albania, when Enver Hoxha was enforcing state atheism, about an Orthodox lady in the ethnically Greek region of southern Albania. The soldiers had come to remove all the religious articles from the village, and they went house to house searching for icons, prayer books, and Bibles. When they finished their search, an older lady went to the captain commanding the troops and smugly told him his troops had missed a cross. They once again searched her home but found nothing. She taunted them again, and they tore the house apart, looking for it. Finally, the captain came back to her and demanded to know where the cross was. She then made the sign of the cross and stood

awaiting reprisal. The story goes that the captain was stunned and walked away amazed."

"YOU don't think that's what happened."

"No. In my mind, I'm reasonably certain that he pulled out his service revolver and shot her dead on the spot because that's what would have happened in Albania. But that's no more the point than the tacked-on happy ending in Job."

"Huh?"

"From textual evidence, it's fairly clear that the challenge by Satan in the beginning and the restoration of Job in the end were tacked onto a dialogue about suffering to help the story make sense. They aren't strictly necessary to the lesson, but some scribe somewhere thought they should be added."

"Interesting. So the Albanian lady wasn't seeking martyrdom? Or was she?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. I'd put it down to a story about holding to the faith in the face of overwhelming social forces trying to destroy it. The specific outcome may or may not have been martyrdom. The story I heard had the ending with the soldier walking away."

"You're weird, Petrovich! Why not keep the story with the righteous person winning?"

"Because, as my grandfather says, 'Life is suffering'. Or, to use another analogy, putting rosewater on dung doesn't change the character of the manure; it just makes it smell a bit less like manure for a time."

"That's depressing."

"I never understood what he was saying until all that stuff happened with Jocelyn, Liz, and Angie. Now I have something of a taste of what he meant."

"That's kind of the opposite story from what you hear all the preachers on TV and radio say."

"And what story does the Bible tell about what happened? And the history we have from the early Church?"

"They paid a heavy price for following Jesus."

"Yes. There is no 'health and wealth' Gospel. To borrow from Sir Winston Churchill, and paraphrase -- *'I would say to the people as I said to those who have joined this church: I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering.'* And to continue to paraphrase that speech, and substitute 'salvation' for 'victory' -- *'You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Salvation. Salvation at all costs; salvation in spite of all terror; salvation, however long and hard the road may be, for without salvation, there is nothing.'*"

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Wait to see what happens after Angie talks to Doctor Mercer. She isn't expecting an answer from me in the next few days."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I do need to leave in a few minutes."

"I remember. What are you going to say to Elizaveta?"

"Nothing. Well, I will tell her I'm having lunch with Becky tomorrow. My parents will both be working, so I won't see them."

"You won't tell her Angie visited?"

"Why cause unnecessary turmoil?"

"Then you've made your decision?"

"When I asked Elizaveta to marry me."

"And NOTHING could change that? Not even Angie?"

"Are you trying to change my mind, Lissa?"

"No, it just seems that you were confused, and suddenly you aren't."

"Oh, I'm still very confused, but I also feel I need to continue down the path I'm on."

"Even if it's not the right one?"

"I don't know that there's a right or wrong path here, really. It's about which of several possible futures I believe is the one which is the best."

"And being Doctor Mike trumps being Deacon Mike, Daddy Mike, and any other possible incarnations of Mike. You would choose celibacy over giving up on being a doctor. Everything else has to take a back seat."

"Yes, but without turning back into my former self and becoming like the girl in Indianapolis."

"I bet she's the most boring lay on the planet!" Clarissa replied.

"Then again," I replied with a grin, "she was pretty hot, and she is probably in need of serious stress relief the way Sandy was!"

"Maybe she likes girls!"

"Anything is possible! Maybe she likes both guys and girls, and she'd be the perfect wife for us!"

I laughed, "That fantasy again? I just don't see it happening."

"Well, we're not going to Indianapolis, so we'll likely never find out."

"I need to get going," I said, standing up.

"I'll be heading to Abby's in about an hour. She's at work."

Clarissa stood, we hugged, and I headed out to my car for the drive to the Kozlovs' house. Elizaveta greeted me at the door when I arrived and brought tea so we could sit by the fire in the great room.

"Tomorrow I'm going to have lunch with my friend Becky. She's visiting my parents for a few days."

"She's the one who lived with your parents after her parents got into trouble with the government, right?"

"Yes. She's attending Central Michigan University. We keep in touch occasionally. I didn't even know she was coming to visit until she called me yesterday. And speaking of yesterday, how was your tea?"

Elizaveta rolled her eyes, "Fun when I was five, boring now. I really can't stand the long white gloves!"

"What do you plan to wear for our wedding?"

"Just the nice white dress I have, no veil, gloves, or anything like that. And you're wearing your suit, right?"

"That's the plan. Have you told your grandmothers?"

"Yesterday. That was another reason I didn't enjoy the tea outing. We're not doing a traditional Russian wedding or any of the traditional things afterwards. Just the reception at the country club with dinner, the cake, and dancing."

"Cutting ties with the Old Country?" I asked.

"You know my parents mostly have; I think it ends here."

"What about your grandparents teaching the kids Russian?"

She shrugged, "If they want to, but we'll always speak English to them."

I nodded, "We're on the same page. Clarissa actually noticed I stopped using as much Russian."

"You used it mostly because of Tasha, right?"

"Yes, and because I could say things in Russian in public I could never get away with saying in English!"

"Tasha said you knew ALL the bad words but had trouble carrying on a lengthy conversation."

"Now I'm worried!"

"I plan to talk to Clarissa, too!"

"Now I'm positively frightened!"

"Both those girls love you, Mike!"

"That only makes it worse!"

"Oh, please!" Elizaveta protested, followed by a soft laugh.

"If the three of you are ganging up on me, I'm in REAL trouble!"

"Yes, because it's so terrible to have me speak with girls who love you and for you to have friends who know you quite well speak to me. And it's a terrible thing for me to be friends with the person you will probably spend more time with than any other?"

"No, of course not! And you know I was teasing. I want you to be friends with them. Before I forget, I need to pick you up about 6:30am on Sunday so we can get to the Cathedral before Matins."

"OK. I'll be ready."

We had a nice afternoon together, went out to dinner, and then saw *Johnny Dangerously*, a movie we both thoroughly enjoyed for the second time.



January 3, 1985, West Monroe, Ohio

On Thursday, I drove to West Monroe to have lunch with Becky at Marie's. She was waiting in a booth, and I simply nodded to the hostess as I walked past. Becky jumped up, we hugged, and then we both sat down.

"How are Abby and Jake?" I asked.

"Jake is fine. He has a girlfriend, and they're pretty serious."

"He's a Junior, right?"

"Yes. He's playing ice hockey, and he's a pretty good forward. He's hoping to play in college."

"And Abby?"

"She moved in with an older guy; a lot older."

"How much older?"

"He's about forty, I think. My grandparents are pretty upset, and her therapist told her not to do it."

"And she's eighteen, so nobody can stop her," I replied. "Is there something wrong with this guy?"

"Other than him being old enough to be her dad?"

I shrugged, "In normal circumstances, I wouldn't care one way or the other, but I'm guessing you think this is because of what happened when she was younger."

"Obviously. But you wouldn't have a problem with it?"

"I tend to mind my own business. But also, my great-grandfather was thirty years older than my great-grandmother."

"But that was in Russia, wasn't it?"

"So?"

"I guess maybe it's perspective."

"You know about Liz and Paul, right?" I asked.

"Yes. I guess it's just, well, never mind."

"I'm not saying that it's good or that Abby is doing the right thing; in fact, I suspect she isn't. But it's not just the age gap."

"No, I guess not. I think she's looking for something that she'll never really find, and I'm afraid something bad is going to happen."

"There, I think I agree with you. But the lesson I learned with Liz is that unless Abby thinks she's doing the wrong thing, all you'll do is ruin your relationship with her. The only thing you can do is be there for her when she needs you."

"Like you did with Liz."

"Yes."

"Do you still think she was wrong?"

"It's certainly not the decision I would have made, but she's happy. And in the end, it's her life to live as she wants. How about you?"

Becky shrugged, "School is fine."

"And?" I asked, knowing she had something more to say and guessing what it was.

"You really want to hear this?"

"I'm not sure if what I want matters. If you need to say something, go ahead."

"Why did you never really give me a chance?"

"Distance, I suppose, is the answer you're expecting, and it's probably the safest thing for me to say, but it's not the complete truth. I made no real effort, and, to be honest, it was because there were girls in McKinley who were available and interesting, even if they weren't girls I was going to marry. Events, some of my own doing, but some done by others, led me to a place where I needed to find an Orthodox girl to marry, one of whom the bishop would approve."

"And you never said anything until the day you told me you were seeing Elizaveta and intended to ask her to marry you. It was clearly a done deal, and you never said a word beforehand; you never asked me or gave me a chance."

"No, I didn't."

The waitress came and took our orders, and we waited for her to bring our drinks before we continued the conversation.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I never extracted a promise of any kind from you, Mike, except for one -- to give me a chance. You broke that promise."

"I did," I admitted.

"Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I'd transferred to Taft."

I shrugged, "I have no idea. Tasha and I were still dancing around our relationship, and we didn't really resolve that until about a year ago. And Angie was here, and to be honest, I was, and still am, deeply in love with her. But her illness made a relationship impossible, though that wasn't really clear until last Summer. By then, you and I were already drifting further apart, for which I'll take responsibility because I was focused on Angie. And to be honest, I would have been engaged to her years ago if not for her illness."

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you simply owned up to not trying. I probably could have done more, but I do feel as if I was always second or third to some other girl."

"Because you were," I replied. "There's no sense in me trying to deny it."

"Do you know how annoying you are?" Becky asked, sounding slightly frustrated. "I can't even get angry with you because you simply admitted what you had done!"

"I think being upset, even angry, with me for breaking my word would be appropriate. As I said, I'm sorry. There really isn't anything I can do to make it up to you, either."

"No, I suppose there isn't unless you're going to break things off with Elizaveta. And no, I didn't invite you here to try to convince you to do that, if that's what you're thinking."

I smiled, "No, you did what I pretty much expected you to do. Well, assuming you were going to do anything at all other than catch up."

"You didn't think I was going to try to change your mind?"

"That's not you," I replied. "Well, unless you've done a one-eighty from when we last saw each other. And even if you were inclined to do that, I think you know me well enough to know that there wasn't any real chance of that working."

"Given how you handled yourself before we finally went to bed together, I'd say that was pretty obvious. And no, I have no regrets about going to bed with you. I just wish things had turned out differently."

"I understand."

"I'd like to come to your wedding, if it's OK."

"Of course it's OK! You're on the guest list I gave Elizaveta's grandmothers. The invitations will go out in March. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Was this lunch the reason you came to visit?"

"Partly, but I did want to see your parents again, and I really was bored at home. How is your break going?"

"Great, though I am looking forward to school starting again on Monday."

"What courses?"

"Physical Chemistry, with a lab, Statistical Methods For Biology, Abnormal Psychology, and Russian Literature. The last one is being taught by Doctor Blahnik."

"The professor who offered you a place to live?"

"Yes."

"And you had her daughter for your music class, right?"

"Right. You?"

"A pair of psych classes, a sociology class, and a childhood development class."

"Still planning on social work?"

"Yes. I'll start on a Master's right away because it's the best way to get a good job. My grandparents can afford to cover it because my sister won't be going to college."

"And if she changes her mind?"

"She'd have to finish High School first."

"Whoa!" I gasped. "She dropped out?"

"The day she turned eighteen."

"That's not good at all. I take it she moved in with the guy that day or right after?"

"That day. She went to the office, signed the papers to drop out, then packed her things and left. I'm pretty sure she was sleeping with him before that."

The waitress brought our food, and we began eating.

"All you can do is be there for her when she needs you," I said. "It's the only way."

"I just have a really bad feeling about it," Becky said with obvious trepidation.

There really wasn't anything else for me to say, so I simply nodded and continued eating. It was a few minutes before Becky started talking again, and we continued with 'small talk' until we finished eating. I paid for lunch and left the tip, and we walked out to the parking lot.

"Thanks for having lunch with me," Becky said. "I guess the next time I see you will be your wedding."

"Thanks for not lecturing me and letting me off the hook so easily."

We both smiled and then hugged. I watched as she got into her car and drove off, then got into my car and headed to McKinley to see Elizaveta. As I drove, I thought about Becky's mild reprimand about how I'd treated her and what I might have done differently, and I really didn't see how I could have taken any course of action that would have helped, short of not dating seriously. And even that wouldn't necessarily have made much of a difference. It wasn't so much that I didn't give her a real chance, but that distance had made it difficult, and I hadn't done anything to overcome the difficulty.

As I neared McKinley, I thought about the situation with Angie. I had told Clarissa that I intended to carry through with my commitment to Elizaveta, but no matter what I did, thoughts of Angie always continued to swirl in my mind.

The fundamental problem was that I'd never stopped loving her and didn't think I ever would. I was concerned about the effect that would have on my marriage, especially if Angie was at a place where she truly could function in society and be a wife and mother. If I couldn't break the spell, things could turn out badly for all involved.

In a sense, I was hoping for Doctor Mercer to bail me out, but I realized that wasn't truly a possibility. No matter what Doctor Mercer said, I'd have to make my own judgment about Angie's mental health and then act on that decision. I was concerned for Angie, for Elizaveta, and for myself, and it was entirely possible that I could make the 'right' decision and still suffer devastating consequences. I wondered if I could have avoided the situation by acceding to Angie's request to make love with her, but that had been fraught with so many dangers I'd refused, and I was reasonably certain that had been the correct decision.

I spent the last five minutes of my drive trying to clear my head so that I wasn't distracted while I was with Elizaveta, and as I pulled into the driveway, I finally managed to get myself into a proper state of mind.



Theophany, January 6, 1985, Columbus, Ohio

On Sunday morning, I picked up Elizaveta as planned, and we set out for the cathedral in Columbus.

"How often will we need to be in Columbus?"

"However often the bishop says!" I replied.

"Yes, of course, but how often will that be?"

"Not all that often because once I'm a deacon, he won't want to take me away from the parish. The other deacons in the diocese usually serve at the Cathedral once a year, sometimes twice. There are also the Deanery meetings, but attending those will be a bit difficult for both of us because of school. They're usually held on a Monday and Tuesday in June and November. Deacons are excused if they can't take time off from work or, in my case, school. The same is true for the wives who have their own sessions."

"I didn't realize that the wives went to the Deanery meetings."

"In our diocese, they do. Most of the meetings are separate, but the bishop always has a meal with everyone, and there are joint worship services. He needs to care for the wives as much as his clergy. But we won't be able to go because I most likely won't be able to get away. You remember what I said about my medical training, right?"

"A week off in the Summer between your first and second year, and after that, only the week between Christmas and New Year's. What will you do about Holy Week?"

"Wait to see what my class schedule looks like, and then negotiate with my professors as best I can. The student handbook said that the medical school does its best to accommodate religious practices but that, in some cases, it's not possible. It'll likely be a conflict until at least my second year of Residency, when I'll have slightly more flexibility in setting my own schedule. That said, the fact that Pascha usually doesn't line up with Western Easter, it may be possible to trade shifts as a Resident, at least according to Doctor Evgeni. But he was training as a GP, so that was different, and as a GP, he gets to set his own office hours. He simply didn't schedule patients during Holy Week service times."

"Are you still planning to do catechism on Thursday afternoons?"

"Yes. I'll meet Mark and Alyssa at Doctor Blahnik's house on Thursdays at 3:30pm. That's walking distance from their houses and makes it easier on all of us than driving out to the church."

"Do you think you'll have trouble from their old church?"

"I have no idea. But when I spoke to them last night, they didn't mention anything, and I certainly wasn't going to bring it up. That makes me think their parents are rational. They did say, back in the beginning, that their parents were questioning the church leadership."

"What about that guy who stood in front of your car?"

"I haven't seen him again. I'm not really concerned at this point. The leader of the guys who attacked Robby and Lee is in jail while his cohorts are on probation. The guys on probation would have to be pretty dumb to do anything, but then again, their behavior wasn't exactly smart in the first place."

"How do you find it so easy to love everyone and so easy to forgive?" Elizaveta asked.

"Who said it's easy?" I countered. "And there are people I find it difficult to love or forgive."

"The doctor who accused you? And the dean?"

"Those would be the two I was thinking of," I replied.

There were also the guys who had gang-raped Liz who were serving lengthy prison terms, but I wasn't going to mention them.

"But if they were to ask your forgiveness, you'd give it and mean it, right?"

"I'd like to think so," I replied. "But without «metanoia», is there actually forgiveness available?"

"You mean if they weren't truly sorry?"

"Yes, but I can't discern their hearts, only their actions. And I don't see either of them changing their ways short of the Holy Spirit working in their hearts. Can a leopard change its spots?"

"That's about acting according to your true nature, right?" Elizaveta asked.

"Yes. Without a change of heart, you'll continue to behave as you did in the past."

"You had a change of heart last Summer?"

That was an interesting question and a somewhat difficult one because I had considered myself a faithful Christian despite my weakness and sin. But, to answer Elizaveta's question any way other than in the affirmative would cause her to question if I was serious about my change in behavior.

"Certainly, with regard to purity," I replied. "But please remember, even the most devout, faithful Christians are tempted to sin. And no, I'm implying nothing about not being faithful to you, only that even faithful Orthodox Christians sin. You remember what the Apostle Paul wrote?"

"That we sin because sin lives within us, and it is difficult to resist."

"Yes."

"And how do I know that you won't fall in the future?"

"Because I've given you my word, and I'll have you to help me as well."

"By having as much sex as possible?" she asked with a silly smile.

"I believe that will help, yes," I replied with a grin.

When we arrived at the Cathedral, Elizaveta stood quietly in the nave while I went to find Protodeacon Seraphim so I could begin my duties. Just over four hours later, after Matins and the Divine Liturgy and a light lunch, everyone left the church to head for the confluence of the Scioto and Olentangy rivers, where the bishop would perform the Great Blessing of the Waters.

At the riverside service, I was tasked with reading the three Old Testament lessons from Isaiah, while Subdeacon Alexi read the selection from Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, and Protodeacon Seraphim proclaimed the Gospel, which was from Mark, and was simply three verses about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. Then, following a lengthy litany and prayers, the bishop blessed the waters, and we concluded the service with Psalm 33 [*Author's Note: This is Psalm 34 in Protestant Bibles*] and a dismissal.

Once the service was completed, we headed to the Chancery for an early dinner with Bishop ARKADY, Father James, Protodeacon Seraphim, and Subdeacon Alexi; Father James was the priest who served at the Cathedral. We were joined by Matushkas Mary, Rachel, and Natalie, the wives of the priest, deacon, and subdeacon. When we arrived, the bishop asked me to step into his study with him.

"Is everything going OK with your studies and your preparation for your marriage?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Classes begin again tomorrow, and I should graduate *summa cum laude*, with a 4.0 GPA."

"Very good. And your finances?"

"In good shape. With the money I've saved from working, as well as what my grandfather gave me, and with not having to pay rent, we'll be just fine until I start my Residency. Elizaveta will likely work the Summer after her Junior year because I'll be in school year-round. Once she graduates, she'll work until we start a family."

"Right after she graduates?"

"That's not decided just yet, but it wouldn't surprise me if that's what she wants."

"Far be it from me to discourage anyone from having a family, but given your other commitments, be wise about the timing."

"Yes, Vladyka."

"Is there anything you need from me?"

"No, Vladyka, I don't believe so."

"Good, good. If you have struggles, please make sure you speak with Father Nicholas or, if you prefer, to me directly."

I wondered if he sensed something in my demeanor or tone of voice, but it seemed that he was aware of my struggles with what to do about Angie. I could see things going badly no matter what I did, and that was certainly something I could talk to him about. The downside was doing the other thing I was concerned about -- causing unneeded turmoil. But, if I couldn't trust the bishop

to remain calm and give good spiritual advice, did I have any business accepting ordination?

"Angela Stephens came to see me on New Year's Day," I said.

"And this has caused you to doubt yourself?" he asked gently.

"I'm not sure what the right words are, Vladyka. You're aware of her situation, and I'm just concerned that no matter what course of action I take, something terrible could happen."

"Mischa, I know this will sound trite, but it is also true -- we are each responsible for our own actions. Have you spoken to anyone about this?"

"I called Doctor Mercer to let her know, and I'm going to speak with her on Saturday morning."

"That's good. She'll help you figure out how best to care for Angela. Have you spoken to Father Stephen, her confessor?"

"No."

"You might want to do that after you speak with Doctor Mercer so that he is aware of the situation. Her spiritual care is in his hands, as her medical care is in the hands of her doctors. Take their advice and follow it."

"Vladyka, she wants to marry me," I said quietly.

The bishop nodded, "I discerned that it was more than just a visit to say 'hello' or to wish you 'Happy New Year'. There would be no internal struggle if it were something simple. My question for you is this -- are you considering the ramifications of saying 'no' or the ramifications of saying 'yes'?"

"Both," I replied. "I know I shouldn't even have a thought about saying 'yes', but..."

"Mischa, I cannot tell you what to do, but you must know what would happen should you break your betrothal. I suggest, strongly, you discuss this with Father Nicholas, and that you fast and pray. Your heart must be fully committed to whatever choice you make, and you must accept the consequences of your choice. Have you said anything to Elizaveta?"

"No. I didn't want to cause her any emotional distress because my thoughts were muddled. I do know what I ought to do."

"And doing what you ought to do is not an easy thing, is it?"

I shook my head, "No, it's not."

"Then, let us go join the others for our meal and put this aside for the moment. But do not delay in talking with Father Nicholas."

"I won't, Vladyka," I said, accepting the mild and loving rebuke.

"Good. And Mischa? Next time, make use of the spiritual riches and wisdom of the Church. Do not struggle alone."

"Yes, Vladyka."

He smiled and nodded, and we left his study to join the others.

XLIII. A Strong Prescription

Theophany, January 6, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

After I dropped Elizaveta at home, I took a chance and drove to Father Nicholas' house. Matushka Natalya greeted me at the door and let me in. Father Nicholas invited me to his study.

"Sorry to bother you at home, but the bishop suggested I speak to you."

"Am I going to be happy at the end of this conversation?"

"Angie drove from Cincinnati on New Year's Day to talk to me."

"I thought she wasn't supposed to drive!"

"She's not; she did it anyway."

"What did she say?" Father Nicholas asked.

"She wants to resume our relationship, of course."

"Mike, may I be a bit flip?"

"Of course."

"That's another fine mess you've gotten us into!"

"Oh, it gets worse," I sighed. "It's made me think about how I feel about her."

"Lord have mercy! And you told Vladyka that?"

"He asked me if I was struggling, and it was clear he thought I was, so I told him. He gently reprimanded me for not talking to you, then told me to talk to you, to fast, and to pray."

Father Nicholas' lips formed a wry smile, "He has a way of discerning when his clergy are out of sorts, even if we think we're putting on our 'game face', as it were."

"I did speak with Doctor Mercer, and I'm going to see her on Saturday. Vladyka suggested I speak with Father Stephen as well."

"I think you better lay this out from the start."

I nodded and took him through everything that had happened from the time Angie had shown up at the door until the moment I came to his door.

"What is it you want, Mike?" he asked when I finished.

"To do the right thing and to not hurt anyone."

"Those two things are often mutually exclusive."

"I know," I sighed.

"Vladyka is right, of course, in that your heart must be fully committed to whatever decision you make. And it is also the case that Angie is responsible for her actions. That said, I know from experience that if anything bad happens with her, you're going to blame yourself. And it's going to hit you very, very hard. But, and this is very important, you can't let the potential for bad results be the deciding factor. You know as well as I do, maybe even more from your work

with your therapist, that it's entirely possible that the worst result would come from attempting a relationship with Angie."

"I know."

"We often 'know' lots of things, and yet, we don't act as if we actually know anything at all. Like His Grace, I can't tell you what to do except to say that you need to carefully consider the cost of your actions."

"Something Clarissa and I discussed, along with building on a foundation of bedrock, not sand."

"Until this is resolved, I want you to add the daily Psalter readings to your prayers, and I want you to keep the Hours, adjusting for times when you are in class. I'm also going to give you a strict fasting rule -- one full meal a day, according to the strictest Lenten rule, with whatever you need in the way of nuts, berries, or greens to ensure you are able to complete your studies. Nothing but water or tea to drink. Do you accept this rule?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good. And when you are walking to class or sitting listening to music, I want you to pray the 'Jesus Prayer' with your «chotki»."

"Yes, Father."

"Good. I will pray that the Holy Spirit gives you proper discernment for whatever course you need to take, but I also want you to listen to your therapist and to Father Stephen. Remember, Mike, it's synergy. Prayer isn't magic; it's meant to tune us into the correct channel, if you will. And the Holy Spirit won't whisper in your ear, but He will work through the doctors and clergy and

through you. Your job is to discern what is in your heart and what you need to do."

"You wouldn't happen to know where I can find a «старец» (*staretz*), would you?" ("Elder")

"Besides Mount Athos or some deeply wooded area of the Urals? Very unlikely. That said, there are some who say that Father Roman Braga (See: <https://oca.org/in-memoriam/archimandrite-roman-braga>), who was the priest at Holy Trinity in Youngstown but who is now at the Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania, might be one. Would you like for me to arrange for you to see him?"

"Do you think it would do any good?" I inquired.

"That's the wrong question," Father Nicholas gently corrected. "It's whether or not YOU think it will do any good."

"There's also the practical matter that it's a bit over four hours each way."

"I daresay eight hours in a car is a small price to pay for good spiritual advice, if you feel you need it."

"I think I'll wait to make that decision until I see Doctor Mercer and then talk with Father Stephen. I'll follow the prescription you gave me as well."

"That's a reasonable decision, Subdeacon. When will you see Elizaveta?"

"At church on Wednesday," I replied. "We'll have our usual Friday date, then dinner on Saturday at her house, and our usual afternoon and evening with Tasha and Nik on Sunday. I'll resume my Tuesday dinners with Viktor next week."

"I'd like you to call me each evening, though we can speak in person on Wednesday and Saturday. Just to check in on how you're doing."

"Yes, Father."

"And eat whatever the Kozlovs serve for dinner, Mike. There's no need to reveal this to anyone."

"Yes, Father."

"Then I'll talk to you tomorrow evening and see you Wednesday unless you need to see me before then for some reason."

I received his blessing, and he walked me to the door. We said 'good night', I got into my car, and headed back to campus. We'd moved into our dorms and bought our books on Saturday, so everything was ready for our first day of our last semester. I found Clarissa and invited her to my room. I greeted a few others on the way, but when Clarissa and I got to my room, I shut the door for privacy.

"The bishop basically intuited I was struggling, so he knows what's going on. I also went to Father Nicholas after I dropped Elizaveta at home, so he knows as well. I have a very strict prayer and fasting rule at the moment."

"Punishment?"

I laughed softly, "Not at all. Asceticism is a very traditional form of spiritual discipline used for many purposes. In this case, it's to help me focus and get my heart, body, mind, and soul in agreement. But, as always, it's in conjunction with professional and spiritual help; in this case, Doctor Mercer and, very likely, Angie's pastor. And if I need it, there's a very spiritual monk at the monastery in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania, who I can visit."

"All that because you had a few stray thoughts about Angie?"

"Because that's where it starts," I replied. "Let me ask this -- do you think an affair just happens instantaneously? That a man goes from being a faithful, devoted husband to jumping into bed with another woman in the blink of an eye? Or does it start much sooner when he acts on a stray thought? And by 'acting', it could be so little as a kind word to a woman he finds attractive."

"I'd say in most cases it's as you say; it starts with flirting, or whatever, and then progresses. And I suppose even the flirting doesn't have to be conscious when it comes right down to it. But at some point, he begins to see her in a different light."

"Exactly. Now, think that through in my case."

"Oh, shit," Clarissa said, her voice barely a whisper.

"Yeah. That's MY path to destruction."

"Then you CAN'T consider Angie in that way."

"And yet, I have. And I need to know why. And I need to get my heart right, or it's all going to end in tears, no matter what I do."

"Maybe you and I shouldn't tease each other," she said quietly.

"You made it quite clear you aren't going to have sex with a guy again, and your moment of weakness won't involve me. It'll be some cute female nurse or doctor or med student who plays for the other team. Well, 'other' from my perspective."

"And yours will be...a study partner or fellow Resident to whom you get close without realizing just how close you've become. And that's what the REAL problem is."

I nodded, "And one I think both the bishop and Father Nicholas understand. Stray thoughts will always come, but if we don't actively fight them, they have a way of taking hold, even when we know they aren't in our own best interest."

"Are you talking about you or me?"

"Both. What's the most dangerous stray thought you've had?"

"Thinking about marrying you is anything but a stray thought, Petrovich!"

"But it started that way, didn't it? And I'm talking about the recent thought, not our original experiment."

Clarissa took a deep breath, let it out, and answered, "Yes."

"Think about the seeds of destruction sown there if you had suppressed who you are in favor of what began as a stray thought?"

"But won't that result in a closed mind? If you discard every stray or random thought? You'll turn into a fanatic like that idiot preacher who couldn't see beyond his own feedback loop."

"Fortunately, Orthodoxy has never fought with science, so I have two thousand years of tradition and wisdom to help me discern the 'good' stray thoughts from the 'bad' ones."

"The spiritual discipline!" Clarissa exclaimed.

"Exactly. Constant prayer helps keep one's mind from wandering; physical discipline such as fasting trains our bodies and provides an example for our souls. If we think about the current topic, it's as if I walked into a buffet where I have limitless choices, but I'm on a strict diet from a doctor due to some health condition. Eat the wrong things, and I die. Eat the right things, and I live. Think about that for a moment."

Clarissa was quiet and closed her eyes. They popped open a moment later.

"The 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' in the Garden of Eden!"

"And the lesson?"

"The metaphor of the 'forbidden fruit'," Clarissa nodded. "Which we use for things like having an affair."

"Life lessons, straight from Scripture, without the Bible having to be literally true."

"I'm curious: did Adam and Eve have sex before they ate from the tree?"

"Duh!" I chuckled. "Two naked people, alone in a beautiful garden with nothing to do but eat and..."

"Fuck!" Clarissa completed the sentence as we both laughed together.

"Pretty much. And given that Orthodoxy teaches that sexuality is part of the normal human condition and that it is the perfect metaphor of complete union -- the two become one flesh -- there would be no reason for them not to make love or procreate before 'The Fall'. And by the way, do you know that cars are mentioned in the Bible?"

"Cars?"

"Sure. God drove Adam and Eve from the Garden in a 'Fury'. And later, all the apostles were in one 'Accord'. Motorcycles, too -- David rode his 'Triumph' out of Jerusalem."

"Oh, stop!" Clarissa laughed. "Seriously?"

"Baseball and tennis, too!" I continued. "The story starts 'In the Big Inning', and later, Joseph served in Pharaoh's court."

"That's getting worse, Petrovich!"

"You know the toy 'Stretch Armstrong', right?"

"Stop it, Petrovich!"

"Moses tied his ass to a tree and walked into the desert."

"I'm going to kick YOUR ass if you don't stop, Petrovich!"

"One more. How do Orthodox Christians settle disputes?"

"I have no idea," Clarissa replied, clearly exasperated by the puns.

"With canons."

"One more, and I'll crown you with many crowns!"

"Hah! Now YOU'RE doing it!"

"Shit! You really are a complete goofball!"

"Yes, but for the next week or so, I'm going to be a monk. Once I say my evening prayers tonight, it's 'sober, reserved, introspective Mike' for the next week, at least."

"People will notice."

"Yes, they will. I'll spend more time alone, too. But I will make time for you. And before you object, you are not going to cause problems for me. And I will need someone to talk to."

"I can't say I'm in tune with where you're going, but I'll try to help however I can."

"And I very much appreciate that."



January 7, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday morning, I arose very early and read the Matins service, then went to the gym to run. After my run and shower, I read the 'First Hour' prayers, and because of my class schedule, the 'Third Hour' prayers as well. They were to be done at 6:00am and 9:00am, respectively, but on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I'd have to combine them. The 'Sixth Hour' prayers were to be done at noon, but I'd do them right before lunch. The 'Ninth Hour' prayers were done at 3:00pm, and then Vespers after dinner but before studying. Finally, Compline and the 'Midnight Office' before I went to bed. All in all, it would consume better than four hours of my day. Fortunately, I had my own copies of the *Octoechos*, *Horologion*, and *Typikon*, so I didn't need to acquire any books.

I'd debated about what meal to eat and how best to handle things and decided that a full meal at lunch was the best option because I could have PB&J sandwiches and fruit, which were always available in the cafeteria. I'd have tea and a small serving of fruit for breakfast and a small salad for dinner. That all fit within Father's prescription, and I had mixed nuts in my room if I needed them.

I joined the gang to walk to breakfast after completing my prayers.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more!" Fran declared in her usual way as we walked to the cafeteria. "For the last time!"

"Until we start medical school, and then...ugh!" Sandy grouched.

"Poor babies," Lara teased. "Six-figure incomes await! And status as 'gods!'"

"If Mike is going to be a 'god', I do NOT want to live in THAT universe!" Sandy replied.

"And if you need a doctor in the ER ten years from now, who would you want to take care of you?" Robby asked.

"Oh, shut up!" Sandy grouched, but she was laughing.

We arrived at the cafeteria, and when I sat down with a cup of tea and a small bowl of blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries, I got a few looks, but nobody said anything. Even Sophia didn't keep close track of the fasting calendar, so they were used to me eating differently. I suspected someone would ask at dinner, but there really wasn't a way to avoid those questions. I'd need a plausible answer which didn't reveal my internal struggles.

When we finished breakfast, we went back to the dorm to get our books, and Sandy, Clarissa, and I headed for our Abnormal Psych class. It was a fitting way

to start my last semester at Taft, given the struggles I was having over Angie, which were, in effect, brought about by psychological problems.

"Welcome to Abnormal Psychology. I am Doctor Beverly Johnson. One in four people are, at some point in their lives, diagnosed with some form of mental disorder. You will, without question, encounter many people in your lives with mental disorders. We'll learn the signs, symptoms, causes, and treatments, both historical and modern, and trace the development of the science of psychiatry and psychology. If you'll pick up the syllabus, which was on your chair when you came in, we'll begin."

I had already met people like that, and they were very dear to me. I hoped, from the class, to get a better understanding, no matter which path I walked through life. We were required to do two research papers, and I was certain I was going to do one on schizophrenia. I was sure as the course progressed, a second topic that mattered to me personally would reveal itself.

After abnormal psych, we went to our physical chemistry class, where we met Fran, Jason, and Pete. It was being taught by a new professor with a thick Slavic accent named Alex Melnicheck. He turned out to be a Ukrainian defector who had been in the US for about four years. The syllabus was about what I had expected, and the lab work was going to be tough, as once again, honors students would have more detailed and thorough analyses to do.

When the class ended, we walked back to the dorm, and I went to my room to say my prayers, then joined the gang for lunch.

"Didn't you just finish a fasting period?" Robby asked, looking at my lunch.

"Yes," I replied. "But sometimes we fast for reasons other than the calendar. It's fairly common amongst Orthodox, especially the clergy. It's particularly effective in helping you settle your mind so you are able to see clearly."

"Monk Michael?" Sophia asked with a silly smile.

"That'll be the day!" Lara replied mirthfully, causing general laughter amongst the girls and head-shaking amongst the guys.

"How's your arm, Robby?" José asked.

"Better. Especially given the asshole bigot is cooling his heels in the county jail."

"How long did he get?"

"I was in court when they were sentenced," I interjected. "Thirty days and six months probation for the ringleader, plus a fine and restitution. The other guys got probation, fines, and restitution."

"The restitution covered the deductible on the insurance, plus a bit, so in the end, it only cost me a bit of discomfort."

"There are members of the church who are pretty unhappy," Clarissa said. "Just keep your eyes open."

"Did something happen?" Lee asked.

"I was confronted by a member of their church," I said. "But other than standing just in front of my left-front bumper for a few minutes to keep me from pulling away from the curb, he didn't really bother me."

"And one of the dads gave you grief after the sentencing hearing, right?" Clarissa asked.

"Sure, but I honestly think that was to be expected. Personally, I'll be interested to see if anyone shows up on Saturday."

"Oh, they will," Robby said. "I saw a poster for a Bible study group they're trying to form on campus to help students live 'God-centered lives'."

"For people who are 'God-centered', that crowd sure likes to stick its nose into other people's business!" Dona declared. "I went to church with a friend a few times when I was little and heard all that crap."

"Mike, you should sign up for the Bible study," Melody suggested.

"No way," I said, shaking my head. "I have enough going on in my life, and that's the last thing I need. I'll be doing catechism with a couple of kids who are interested in the Orthodox Church, and that is a FAR better use of my time than going to one of their Bible studies. Next Fall, my parish will be starting a campus ministry; I'll be advising, but I won't really be able to participate much, if at all."

"At least we'll have something to counteract those crazies who want to burn us at the stake or stone us to death or whatever," Lee said.

"Or worse, try to 'cure' us," Clarissa sighed.

"Mike, is homosexuality a sin?" Sarah asked.

"Only if being human is a sin," I replied. "Desire, in and of itself, is not sin. It leads to sin, but it is not sin. And to answer your next question, ALL sex outside of marriage is equally sinful."

"But your church doesn't allow gays to marry, right?"

"No, it doesn't. I do not have all the answers, either. I can't explain why things are the way they are such that it will satisfy anyone who is homosexual. All I can do is love my friends and pray for them, which I do every day -- for all of you, in fact."

"What do you pray for?" Pete asked.

"The only appropriate prayer there is -- 'Lord, have mercy'. It is, in the end, God's mercy that all of us need. How that plays out practically in each of our lives, I can't possibly say. But I can say, 'Lord, have mercy' and leave it in His hands. Then I go about living my life the best way I'm able, loving my neighbor and caring for widows and orphans. That is, by the way, James' definition of pure and undefiled religion."

"If all Christians acted that way, there would be a LOT less trouble," Jason observed.

We finished our lunch and went back to the dorms for our books. Sandy, Clarissa, and I headed for our biology stats class, which would, for the most part, be a review of the previous courses we'd taken, with a focus on developing rigorous methods for evaluating test data. I didn't see anything in the syllabus or the text which concerned me except that it would mean doing a lot of math. Fortunately, I liked math, so that wasn't a problem.

Our last class of the day was Doctor Blahnik's Russian Literature course. It was a small group, with only a dozen students, of which six were from our gang -- Clarissa, Sandy, Lara, Sarah, Jocelyn, and me. The reading list was as expected -- Tolstoy, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Pasternak, and Chekov. The list was limited by the availability of the texts in English, but there was certainly enough for us to have a good survey, and I saw a note that several poems had been translated by Doctor Blahnik specifically for the course. The one outlier was *Lolita* by Nabokov,

which had been written in English, but given he'd been born in Russia, it made sense to include it.

In the end, there was going to be a lot of reading, and we'd have to start immediately for the class discussions to be of value, though Doctor Blahnik was going to start with several lectures on Russian history to set the stage and discuss works that had never been translated into English. I was the only one in the class who even had a prayer of reading Russian because Lara had never been taught to read or write in Russian as I had. But even my skills were seriously lacking, so anything that wasn't in English was basically off-limits for inclusion in our reading list.

When class finished, we headed back to the dorm. I told everyone I was going to read, went to my room, and shut the door. I put on a Mozart album and settled down with *The Brothers Karamazov*, the first book on our reading list.



January 10, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday afternoon, I met Doctor Blahnik for my guitar lesson.

"So, are you holding out on me with anything else?" she asked as I took my guitar from its case.

"Besides the glass of wine in the tub?" I asked with a silly grin.

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to tease me incessantly just as you did Milena?"

"Because I will, if you let me!" I chuckled. "But no, I haven't been holding out with any other music."

"You did a commendable job with the Springsteen song, but I wonder if you'd like to create a surprise for your wedding?"

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

She smiled and went to a cabinet and extracted a case with a triangular base, which told me immediately what she had -- a «балалайка» (*balalaika*).

"I hope you don't plan to have me learn *Rasputin* by Bony M!" I laughed.

"I thought we might start with *Lara's Theme* from *Doctor Zhivago*. I take it you've never played the balalaika?"

"Correct. My grandfather has one, but I haven't ever heard him play it. I think it belonged to his grandfather originally. It's one of the few things the family brought out of Russia."

"So, *Zhivago* is actually perfect because the balalaika was a symbol of relationship."

"I hadn't thought of that with regard to my grandfather's instrument."

"You know the pop song that follows the motif, right?"

"Yes; *Somewhere My Love*."

"OK. Take this, and let's start. Hold it gently and close to your body. Something very important to remember -- this is not a guitar. You don't strum over the center of the soundboard; the wood is too soft, and you can easily damage it. This one is tuned to D-F#-A, which is an older system. You can also tune it the modern way, which is E-E-A. I have sheet music for *Lara's Theme*, as well as some

Russian folk songs -- *Evening Bells*, *Along the Petersburg Road*, and *Cossack Lullaby*. Using those, I'll teach you the basic chords, as well as proper strumming. You want to start with just down strokes, strumming with your thumb and index finger together."

Doctor Blahnik spent the entire hour teaching me to strum properly, which involved up and down strokes, as well as varied speeds, focusing on the most important technique -- tremolo. The entire experience was very different from playing the guitar and required different techniques. It reminded me very much of my first guitar lessons, only more difficult.

"Take the instrument with you," Doctor Blahnik said. "You'll need to practice."

"Then people will see it," I replied. "How about I keep it at your house and come there a few times a week to practice?"

"That will work."

"Do you think I'm going to be able to play well enough by the end of May?"

"I do. Practice what we worked on today, and then next week, we'll look at the sheet music. You can pick one thing and just focus on it."

I shook my head, "At least two. Because people will demand an encore, though I might be able to skate on that because it'll be my wedding."

"And you'll love the fact they demand one, even if you can't accommodate because of the circumstances."

"Surprisingly, because I didn't like the limelight at all before the concerts."

"It was good for you, Mike. I think it did more for you than anything else that's happened here at Taft. It prepared you for your public debate, which I have to say was greatly appreciated by many of the faculty."

"Sadly, I suspect they didn't actually get the message. They saw me take down a guy with whom they disagreed but didn't hear the real message, which means, in the end, I failed."

"Did you? I want you to reconsider that opinion. Don't answer now, but think about it. Now, go, because I know you have the catechism at my house."

"Thanks, Doctor Blahnik."

She put the balalaika in a soft case, which, with a smirk, I slung over my shoulder like 'the Girl' at the end of Doctor Zhivago.

"She was prettier," Doctor Blahnik teased.

"Then call Rita Tushingam and ask HER to have a glass of wine in the tub!"

"I'm impressed you know her name!"

"I found a book in the library that had information about movies, and I basically memorized the cast list."

"Why?"

"You'll laugh."

"Why?"

"Because I wondered what Obi-Wan Kenobi was doing in a Russian movie!"

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "You do know he was a well-known actor before that silly science fiction movie!"

"Excuse me?!" I exclaimed in outrage. "Silly?"

"Have you seen *2001*?"

"Yes."

"*Solaris*?"

"No. Unfortunately, I haven't seen anything by Tarkovsky."

"Compared to those, *Star Wars* was silly. Do you know the other great movie Sir Alec Guinness was in?"

"Yes. He played Colonel Nicholson in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. He was also in *Lawrence of Arabia* with Omar Sharif. But I didn't know that until after I saw *Star Wars* in '77 and then *Zhivago* about two years ago. I do need to run, or I'll be late."

"See you later, then."

"Bye!"

I left the music classroom and headed to her house, taking a slight detour so I didn't walk down the main path through campus. I didn't want anyone to see the balalaika and was fortunate not to run into anyone I knew on my way to Doctor Blahnik's house. When I arrived, I put the balalaika in my room, put on my cassock, and went back downstairs to wait for Mark and Alyssa to arrive, which they did promptly at 3:30pm.

"Before we start, how are things at home?" I asked after I'd greeted them, and we'd moved to the great room.

"Fine," Alyssa said.

"A bit tense," Mark replied. "Some of the men from the church are giving my dad grief, but it's OK because I'm pretty sure my parents are going to go to a new church in the next few weeks."

"They're more than welcome at Saint Michael the Archangel."

"That might be a step too far for them. I think they're going to go to the Lutheran Church about three blocks from here."

"That's where my friend Jocelyn attends. She likes it -- it has just enough smells and bells, but isn't 'over-the-top' as she likes to say about Orthodox churches."

"Have you been to her church?"

"Not the one here, but back home, I went to her church for her confirmation when she was in eighth grade and once in High School when she won an award for an oratorical presentation. She came to my church a few times, too. Anyway, we'll start with the Council of Nicaea in AD325, which we call the First Ecumenical Council, and it's where Santa Claus slapped a heretic!"

"What?!" Alyssa gasped.

"As the story goes," I said with a grin, "Saint Nicholas of Myra, the Wonderworker, who is the model for Santa Claus, slapped the heretic Arius during the Council and was imprisoned for doing so. There are icons which depict that event. It is only attested late, but it is considered by the Orthodox Churches to be factual. And, even if not, then the point of slapping the arch-

heretic of the Church is instructive in and of itself. But we're getting ahead of the point. Let's begin with the controversy of Arianism, which was why Emperor Constantine called the Council, resulting in the development of the Nicene Creed."

We spent the next hour discussing the development of the Creed, meant to be the basic confession of all Christians.

"Why did they use the word 'Catholic'?" Mark asked.

"I can hear the capital letter in the way you said that," I replied with a soft smile. "The word 'catholic', when not associated with Rome, means 'according to the whole'. It comes from the Greek word «καθόλου» (*katholou*), which is a combination of the Greek words «κατά» (*kata*) meaning "about" and «όλος» (*holous*) meaning "whole". In other words, it is, as we say, what was taught 'always, everywhere, and by all'."

"But wasn't the Creed new?"

"Yes, but remember what I said -- the bishops came together at the Council to proclaim what was being taught in their churches. The main accusation against Arius was, in effect, that he was making stuff up and teaching new things never taught anywhere before. The Creed reflected what the assembled bishops agreed had been taught in all their churches. That's how Arius was defeated at the Council -- 'according to the whole'. Of course, sadly, Arius wasn't defeated with the public, and Arianism spread and had to be addressed by later councils. It still exists today, most notably with the Jehovah's Witnesses, though they aren't pure Arians."

"What about our old church?"

"I believe your church holds, generally, to the Nicene Creed, though I suspect the word 'catholic' is a stumbling block because they see 'catholic' as meaning 'Roman Catholic' and all that entails."

"When did the break come with Rome?"

"Which one?" I asked. "There were several. The final one was in AD1054. We'll get to that as we go through the Councils and explore the Creed. I'll see you both on Saturday at Vespers. And please, invite your parents to attend at least one service in the near future so they can get over the shock before they come to your chrismation."

I walked them to the door and, as I had time before I needed to meet the gang for dinner, I went up to my room and practiced strumming the balalaika.



January 11, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday, I ate very minimally at breakfast and lunch so that I could have a normal meal with Elizaveta, which, because it was a fast day, would draw no attention to my spiritual discipline. My nearly continuous prayer had kept me calm, centered, and focused. The mild hunger pangs from limited food intake reminded me that it wasn't necessary to feed every physical desire. My evening calls with Father Nicholas provided the necessary accountability, though I believed I would have followed his prescription without those calls.

Because of that prescription and the spiritual discipline it entailed, I hadn't really thought about the situation with Angie. But also, because of it, I knew I would be in the correct frame of mind to discuss it with Doctor Mercer and then with Father Stephen. But those conversations were still half a day away. In the

interim, I had my date with Elizaveta and headed to her house to pick her up just after 5:00pm.

"How was school this week?" I asked as we got into my car, with Elizaveta driving.

"About the same as always. Biology, Algebra II, Sophomore English, French, Home Ec, and my elective is 'Current Events'. I also met with the guidance counselor and switched to the 'college-bound track' for Junior and Senior years."

"Good. After dinner, I was thinking we'd go see *The Tempest* put on by the local theatre company."

"That's fine with me. Have you been there before?"

"I saw *Twelfth Night* there during Freshman year. They did a good job."

"What are we having for dinner?"

"Chinese, given that the Nativity Feast ended last Sunday."

"OK. How was your first week of classes?"

"The semester should be fairly easy, though lab reports consume a lot of time. And there's a lot of reading for Doctor Blahnik's Russian literature course. We started with *The Brothers Karamazov*."

"I actually haven't read anything except *Doctor Zhivago*."

"That's on our reading list."

"Did you want to see the proofs of the wedding invitations before they go out?"

"If you double-check that my parents' names are spelled correctly, I don't need to."

"OK. And do you care about who the photographer is?"

"No. I'll leave it to you and your grandmothers and won't get involved unless you ask me to because they tell you they want to do something you don't like. The one thing they can't interfere with is the one thing that matters most, and that's the wedding ceremony itself. For everything else, if you're happy, I'm happy."

"As it should be!" Elizaveta said with a silly smile.

"Just concentrate on driving, not teasing me!" I replied.

"Who's teasing?" she asked petulantly.

"You!"

We arrived at the restaurant and, as we usually did, ordered two dishes which we would share. I served myself less food than usual, which Elizaveta immediately noticed.

"Are you not feeling well?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine. If there are leftovers, I'll take them back to my dorm fridge."

"If you're sure," she said, sounding concerned.

"I am."

We finished eating, and there were, indeed, leftovers, so I asked for a small carton. I put the leftovers in the carton, and when we left the restaurant, we drove to campus, where I hurried up to my room and put them in the fridge, then went back downstairs so Elizaveta and I could walk to the theatre.

"Those rules are SO dumb," she said.

"I agree, but they were the result of some very bad behavior by a few students, and the University had to act. The Dean wanted even stricter rules, but the students objected."

"That's the dean who had it in for you?"

"Yes. And fortunately, she's gone. There were rumors that she would come back next Fall, but supposedly, she has a new job in the Chicago area."

"You don't have trouble with any other professors or deans, right?"

"Correct."

"Good!"

"I agree."

The play was well done, and we both enjoyed it and when it finished, we walked back to campus, where we got into my car, and I drove Elizaveta home. At her house, we exchanged a soft kiss, and then I headed back to campus to do my prayers and get to bed.

XLIV. "I'd worry about your soul."

January 12, 1985, Greater Cincinnati, Ohio

"You came alone?" Doctor Mercer asked when I walked into her office in Milford.

"I did. I'm going to see Angie's pastor after you and I finish our session."

"Did you tell Elizaveta you were going to be here?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell her WHY you were going to be here?"

"No. That seemed to me to introduce unnecessary turmoil. I did tell my bishop and priest about the situation."

"That's unexpected. Why tell them and not her?"

"I saw my bishop on Sunday, and when we were talking, he said that if I was struggling with anything, I should speak to my priest or to him directly. It felt as if he had discerned from our conversation, which had nothing to do with Angie that I had some kind of internal struggle about which I wasn't speaking to anyone. I told him what had happened, and after asking me if I was considering the ramifications of saying 'no' or of saying 'yes', he sent me to talk to my pastor. Father Nicholas prescribed a fairly strict prayer and fasting rule to help me focus."

"And did it?"

"In the sense that I didn't really think about Angie's question until I left campus this morning to drive here, yes. I wondered about that and realized that what Father Nicholas intended was to keep me from obsessing about it until I could speak with you and Father Stephen."

"And knowing you, you would have obsessed, to the detriment of your school work and likely to your relationship with Elizaveta. Pretty wise, don't you think?"

"Yes. Both the bishop and Father Nicholas were clear I should speak with you and Father Stephen -- secular and spiritual help, in synergy."

"A far cry from the fundamentalists who basically think psychology is the Devil's work."

"You know we don't think that way; as the bishop has said in a homily, a miracle by a doctor's hand is no less a miracle."

Doctor Mercer nodded, "Something which was demonstrated a few weeks ago when a very dear friend and former patient nearly died in a terrible accident. Flight for Life and a trauma surgeon in Indianapolis saved her life when by all rights she should have died."

"Indiana University Hospital?"

"Yes."

"We interviewed there, and the acceptance letter was signed by a Doctor Albert Barton, a trauma surgeon."

"That's the one who saved her life in what should have been an impossible situation."

"Small world," I replied. "Will she make a full recovery?"

"Her injuries were obviously severe, but they think so, yes."

"That's good to hear. I suppose we should talk about Angie. How is she?"

"That all depends on the reason you're asking."

I shook my head, "I don't believe that at all. I believe you're concerned that I'll take your answer either as permission or as an attempt to deter me. Do you think I'm that weak-willed?"

"I think you're in love with Angie, and I think that might blind you to the reality of the situation."

"Because that's been my pattern of behavior? What happened when she asked me to make love with her?"

"There was something about the way you spoke on the phone that says this is different."

"Perhaps it was, but I DID call you before I did anything else; well, I talked to Clarissa, but that's because it was New Year's Day, and I waited until the next morning to call you. I also know that no matter what I decide, it's going to have consequences I can neither predict nor control. So, how is she?"

"One question -- is this therapy or, and I say this advisedly, collegial?"

"Collegial. You have my permission to be as blunt as you need to be."

Doctor Mercer nodded, "On the surface, Angie is exactly as you believe she is."

"I did think a bit about what you said on the phone, and I want to ask you how long someone would have to go with no symptoms to say they were no longer suffering from the illness?"

"Mental illnesses don't work that way, Mike. Well, not the one we believe Angie has. In general, there are three types of conditions -- ones which are persistent, ones with relapses, and ones that are one-time events. Generally, the ones in that latter group are the kinds of things people seek short-term counseling for, similar to our occasional sessions. You had a series of traumatic events which caused acute distress but which, once resolved, were no longer a concern, at least with regard to depression or something similar. Do you agree?"

"I think so, yes."

"And the same is true for your friend Jocelyn, right?"

"Again, I think so."

"On the opposite end are the persistent conditions -- the ones that often require drugs, hospitalization, and some kind of long-term, professional, assisted care."

"I'm not sure what the correct word is, but you mean people have to be committed to a mental hospital?"

"Basically, yes, and the term mostly being used now is 'institutionalized'. As for Angie, she's in the middle group, and given her diagnosis, she's in the twenty percent who are able to function somewhat normally day-to-day. But, she's also exhibiting one of the typical effects of schizophrenia -- non-compliance with treatment. In her case, it's trying to stop the drugs even when she needs them. She's also deceiving herself about her ability to teach. She's doing a basic, repetitive job that doesn't require a lot of thought."

"And her classes?"

"When she's in control, she can do them; but Mike, her onset of symptoms was earlier than is typical for females by about five years. And while she seems to be better, you've seen this before; twice, in fact. Those two breaks occurred under stress -- not just relationship stress, but also school, as well as other things. Right now, her life is managed, almost minute to minute, and her stress levels are monitored and regulated. That kind of close, minute-to-minute support is going to be necessary for the rest of her life, and she'll very likely still have breaks when stress builds up, which means a course in psychoactive drugs each time that happens.

"That's the reality, Mike, no matter what it looks like right now. Any future you might have with Angie would require constant attention on your part, and to be blunt, there is no way a medical student or Resident can give her the care and attention she needs. And that's assuming she can actually have the kind of relationship she's asking for, which is, in my estimation, unlikely. Oh, she might get as far as consummating, but at some point, some stress will occur, and she'll have that break."

"You seem so convinced of that future," I said. "But you also said she's in the twenty percent who function in society."

"Yes, by reducing stress, but even that twenty percent have breaks. If you're going to do this, Mike, you're going to have to give up pretty much everything."

"I never said I was," I replied.

"You never said you weren't, either, and our conversation didn't seem as if you were playing Devil's Advocate. You also said you told your bishop you were contemplating it."

"By saying I was considering the ramifications of either answer. You've taken me through what I can expect if I were to try; what happens if I turn her down?"

"I can't predict the future, but it's certainly going to increase her stress levels."

"Five percent of all schizophrenics commit suicide," I said quietly.

"How much reading did you do?"

"I read ahead in my Abnormal Psych text, then on Thursday morning, I went to the campus library and did some research."

"So you knew everything I just told you because it basically comes straight from the textbook."

"I did."

"And your conclusion?"

"Clarissa observed, immediately after you and I spoke, that becoming Doctor Mike trumps being Deacon Mike, Daddy Mike, and every other possible incarnation of Mike. She asserted that I would choose celibacy over giving up on being a doctor. Everything else has to take a back seat."

"Do you agree with her?"

"Maybe not on celibacy..." I smirked.

"I hope you've kept your word to Elizaveta AND to your pastor."

"Are you asking me to make a confession?"

"Do you NEED to make a confession?"

"Only to thinking about Angie when I'm engaged to another girl. Celibacy isn't an issue."

"You can turn that on and off, like a light switch?"

"Apparently so."

"Then why not make use of that ability before you get engaged?"

"I chose not to. I could blame my weakness, but I'm responsible for my own decisions."

"And when you turn it back on, will you be able to control it?"

"In the sense that I'll limit myself to my wife, yes."

"That's a different story from the one you told me during our counseling sessions. You were worried that was going to be your downfall. I certainly can't see you drinking, and you don't have the personality type for narcotics. You do, on the other hand, have the personality for, and a history of, casual sexual relationships and multiple partners during the same time frame. Stress is unavoidable, and our personalities dictate how we respond. In the ER, you're going to be one cool customer. Outside the ER is where I have my concerns."

"You're saying the temptations will come fast and furious?"

"I'm saying it's not even going to be a temptation, but outright attempts at seduction. I've seen it. There will be young women who will simply throw themselves at you."

"Good to know," I replied with a grin. "But I don't respond well to that kind of approach."

"No, you don't. If you slip, it'll be without even realizing what is happening until you find yourself in a situation which, if not physical, will be emotional, and in some ways that's even worse."

"That has been suggested."

"What I'm trying to tell you is that you can't be cavalier about this. Fine. You can turn off your libido. But libido isn't what will cause you to slip, Mike. It's your psyche, and that is something much more difficult to control."

"That has also been suggested by me, in fact. It all starts with a stray thought."

"Then why were you so confident before?"

"You were talking about libido, which I will be able to control, mainly because of a certain sexy, soon-to-be sixteen-year-old girl! It's the emotional connections I have to watch. And I'll have help from Clarissa and Jocelyn, along with my accountability to my priest. I'll have to be on my guard at all times. So, now that we have that out in the open, what is Angie going to do?"

"I can't answer because I don't know. I'm not a mind reader."

"But there are risks."

"Yes. She's likely to have a break."

"Wonderful," I sighed.

"Mike, she's destined to have a break in the future no matter what happens. And you are NOT responsible, and neither is she. It's her illness, and we have to manage it."

"Easy for you to say, difficult for me to internalize."

"There is a larger issue."

"Oh, I know," I sighed. "How any interaction with me might affect her in the future, and should I even see her? I thought about that on the drive here. I have this feeling that I have to marry her or never see her again."

"To be honest, I don't know the answer to that question," Doctor Mercer said. "All we can do is wait and see. Can you handle not seeing her again?"

"Discounting the other option?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Unless you're a complete fraud, and I don't think you are, nor are you that good of a liar, then yes."

"I'll take that compliment," I replied. "It would be difficult, but if that's what's necessary, then I'll do it. The question is, will SHE do it?"

"Again, I don't know. We could completely control her actions if we prescribe the antipsychotics, but we really don't want to do that except when she has schizophrenic episodes. A permanent course of drugs WILL bring about serious side effects, and we want to avoid those if we can."

"This sucks," I sighed.

"Not to take away from your personal feelings, but think about how it must be for her."

"Sorry, I'm not trying to have a 'pity party' for myself. I care for Angie."

"You mentioned talking to her pastor."

I nodded, "I knew she'd need spiritual help no matter what decision I made."

"When did you actually decide?"

"When I walked in the door of your office."

"Sadly, I believe that. Your heart is that conflicted?"

"You know how much I love her..." I sighed.

"But..."

"Clarissa was right -- I want to be a doctor more. I feel like a complete cad."

"May I be direct?"

"Sure."

"How many relationships have you ended for exactly that reason? Or didn't start? You actively tried to chase off girls until you found one you couldn't chase off."

"I didn't chase Angie away. I didn't really try."

"Mike, none of that was *real*. I'm not saying Angie wasn't sincere, but there's no way to know what's real in Angie's mind and what isn't. I'm sure you read that schizophrenia is, among other things, a disorder of the sense of self and that

while schizophrenics observe, they do not properly process observations into meaning."

"But it felt so real. And my love for her is real."

"I don't doubt your love, but for Angie, her sensations, thoughts, ideas, and understanding of the world are incoherent during her episodes. And outside those episodes, she doesn't see or process the world the way you and I do. Her reality is not our reality. She doesn't implicitly understand her thoughts the way you and I do."

"I don't understand my thoughts at times."

"Yes, of course, and that's normal. But what's the definition of a diagnosable illness?"

"When things which might be common to all of us interfere with our ability to function in society."

"At one time or another, you'll exhibit some of the markers for just about every mental illness. The most common one is depression, and usually, it's dealt with by short-term counseling. Clinical depression is a very different thing."

"I know."

"Going back to Angie, her behavior fits a number of things in ICD-9, the ninth revision to the *International Classification of Diseases*. For example, compulsion, which involves rituals."

I couldn't help but laugh, "Then every Orthodox Christian on the planet is mentally ill!"

Doctor Mercer smiled, "This is where I say, 'You said it, not me!' and yes, I know you use those rituals as a coping mechanism at times. And that's healthy. It's not a coping mechanism for Angie; it's a compulsion. Do you see the difference? The things you do each day, your rituals, help you put order in your life, and while you might feel a bit out of sorts if you miss them, you can rationally decide not to do them and not have a breakdown."

"I was teasing, and yes, I do see the difference."

"Another common symptom is one you should recognize from before she had her break -- the future is blocked, and existence seems to be dominated by either the present or the past. And, of course, anxiety caused by fear, in her case, fear of sex. I'll give you one more, too. Please don't read this the wrong way, but major worldview shifts, including adopting a new religion, that don't occur during a manic or depressive phase are another marker."

"Shit," I sighed. "All the symptoms were there. How could I miss them?"

"First of all, when did you start swearing in English?"

"About the time Tasha got engaged to Nik. I rarely use Russian, except for my pet name for Elizaveta -- «Котёнок» (*katyonak*). ("Kitten")

"And second," Doctor Mercer continued, "every single one of Angie's symptoms, taken individually, are things people do all the time. And remember, all of these are basic symptoms which occur before the onset of psychosis. They occur and disappear, exactly as you've seen. But think about all of those things, and think about how normal they look. For example, I suspect you don't send all your converts for a psychological evaluation."

I chuckled, "Are you suggesting they all need their heads examined?"

"Again, 'You said it, not me'," Doctor Mercer replied with a smile. "But no, I suspect most are dealing with some kind of existential question, and that's normal. But Angie didn't convert because of an existential question."

"No, I guess she didn't. I still feel as if I've failed her and that I'm about to fail her again."

"Are you feeling selfish?"

"I don't know if that's the right word, but it sure sounds as if I am when I put being a doctor ahead of everything."

"It's an interesting problem -- the very trait that will make you a good doctor, and one which society values, is the one that has great potential to sow the seeds of your own destruction."

"The relationship problems we hear about with regard to doctors."

"Very much so. And I will point out that you have backed off a bit on that single-minded focus, at least enough to attract the attention of young women."

"A few of whom regularly beat me about the head and shoulders because of that single-mindedness. And that was, in the end, why Tasha and I couldn't marry. Her single-mindedness and mine clashed."

"Yes, though I suspect if she'd been two years younger, she might have been able to adjust her own goals enough to make it work."

"Not once the bishop asked me to become a deacon. Tasha's experience living in her dad's household pretty much put paid to that idea."

"But you could have told the bishop 'no' if you wanted to marry Tasha."

"Could I?" I asked.

"Now we're getting into an area where, if this were counseling, I'd be ethically bound to keep my mouth shut."

"But this is 'collegial', as you said."

"I'm going to say this very carefully, and I do NOT want you to act on it, but 'suggestions' from your bishop are like hypnotic suggestions -- those don't work for everyone, by the way, and probably wouldn't work for you. But some part of your psyche is wired to accept input from your bishop as if it were a command from G-d."

"In a way, it is," I replied. "And I'll point out he did discern I was struggling."

"Again, I'll say this advisedly: how do you tell the difference between psychoanalysis, intuition, a message from G-d, or a parlor trick?"

"Well, our bishops do say that when anyone claims that God spoke directly to them, you should run away as quickly as possible because, more often than not, it's Satan whispering in their ear."

"But..."

"Yes, I know. But I didn't say God told him; I simply said he discerned I had some kind of internal conflict. And he prescribed, through my priest, spiritual medicine. He also reprimanded me for not making use of the wealth of spiritual riches and wisdom of the Church when I was struggling. And I'll also point out that the wisdom of the Church included coming to see you, a professional."

"Let's just say you are not the typical hyper-religious individual."

"Hyper-religious?"

"Do you get out of bed without thinking about the ramifications of your actions with regard to your faith?"

I smiled, "I got *into* bed quite often without thinking about them."

Doctor Mercer laughed, "You know that's not true. You DID think about them, but you set them aside. And you see, that is what I was getting at. You made a rational, logical decision to set aside your belief and practice to gain something you wanted. That's a sign of a reasonably healthy mind. I don't think you've ever exhibited any signs of 'check your brain at the door' with regard to faith."

"Orthodoxy doesn't require that," I replied. "We don't like innovation in prayer or worship, but we have no problem with medicine, technology, or science in general. After all, God gave us our senses and intended for us to use them. So, God worked through the helicopter pilot, the flight surgeon, and Doctor Barton to save your friend. And as a doctor, or even as a deacon, I'm not about to forgo using the skills and abilities God provided all of us in favor of waiting on a miracle! Have you heard the story of the believing man who was at home when a flood was forecast?"

"No."

"He prayed for God to save him. A military truck came by, and he refused to go with them because he was relying on God. The floods began, and a boat came by, they offered to take him from the second-floor window to safety, and he said he was relying on God to save him. The waters continued to rise, and he had to climb onto the roof. A helicopter came by and offered to rescue him, but he refused, saying God would save him. The water continued to rise, and he drowned. When he arrived in Heaven, he complained to God that he had prayed

and not been saved. God said, 'I sent a truck, a boat, and a helicopter! What more did you want?'. "

Doctor Mercer smiled, "That is a perfectly sensible attitude. I assume you've heard the stories of parents who refuse to take their children for medical assistance and rely on prayer?"

"Something no Orthodox clergyman would ever contemplate, let alone do," I replied.

"Nor most mainstream clergyman of any faith. Despite my personal misgivings about religion, I don't see it negatively impacting you."

"I take it you've seen others."

Doctor Mercer nodded, "I have. I've seen several young people who had severe psychological problems created by what I could call fairly extreme religious faith. Mostly, I can help them and the issues resolve themselves, but there have been one or two where the issues never really resolved, and the individual continues to suffer from what to an outside observer looks like mental abuse."

"What would you say about monastic discipline?" I asked.

"That's a tricky subject and one in which I'm not well-versed. Suffice it to say that the difference between a cult and a monastic order would often be in the eye of the beholder."

"I suppose I can see that. Our bishops are very, very careful about the individuals to whom they grant permission to even become novices, and abbots are very careful about whom they accept as brothers or sisters. But I think we've strayed from the topic."

"Have we? I've learned more about you and your thought processes, and I think you've learned more about Angie's situation."

"So what do I do?"

"You intend to marry Elizaveta?"

"Yes. I believe she represents the absolute best way forward to achieve my goals -- doctor, husband, and father, as well as the goals of the Church in ordaining me to the diaconate. I know that sounds crass and analytical, but it is what it is. Caring for Angie in the way she'd need to be cared for isn't possible unless I sacrifice everything about who I am, and I think that's a recipe for disaster."

"I'd actually like you to come back sometime in February, when the dust settles, so to speak, and talk through that. I'm not going to try and talk you out of it, but perhaps we can discuss some strategies for success in your personal relationships, which are going to be under severe stress and strain."

"I think that's probably a good idea."

"With regard to Angie, we don't know when, or even if, her psychosis will emerge. On a positive note, early intervention can delay onset, though there is no way to know for how long. And it's not even clear that it has any effect. There are studies being done that appear to show positive results, but nothing confirmed. Angie's psychiatrist is part of the study, which is actually why I'm involved. But there is a very, very strong probability that she will have more episodes and that the episodes will get worse. You've seen three -- a mild one after the kiss, then two moderate ones."

"If those were moderate, I'd hate to see what a severe one looks like," I sighed.

"Complete disassociation with reality and a complete inability to care for herself, requiring much larger doses of psychoactive drugs with all the attendant negative side effects."

"I'm going to cause that, aren't I?" I asked with trepidation.

"I don't know, but it's certainly possible. What we do know is that you're a trigger."

"Which," I answered slowly, struggling to keep control of my voice, "means not seeing her, doesn't it?"

"That is one approach, but the counter-argument is that you removing yourself completely from her life could cause such a fundamental break in her reality that she never functions again."

"Damned if I do and damned if I don't?"

"We just don't know enough about schizophrenia in general or Angie specifically, to say with any certainty. What I'd like to do is have you speak with her pastor today as you've planned, then for the three of us to speak, and maybe, if it's appropriate, include your pastor and your bishop and decide as a team what the best course of action might be."

"What about Angie's mom?" I asked.

"It's likely better to keep her at a distance from all of this because Angie may lash out at anyone involved, and she's going to need her mom to care for her if we want to avoid institutionalization, which might be unavoidable, depending on how big her break is. I'm not talking permanent commitment, just that she might need round-the-clock nursing care for a period of time while we adjust her dosages."

"This is a hell of an introduction to the medical field," I sighed.

"Remember, I'm not an MD; it's her psychiatrist who prescribes the drugs. He and I discuss the best way forward, but in the end, as the MD, he has the final say."

"Doesn't the patient?" I asked.

"Not in this kind of case. The state basically intervenes and requires the course of treatment, even if the caregiver objects. There are court proceedings, if necessary."

I shook my head, "What a mess."

"You're learning a valuable lesson here, Mike -- it's much easier to put bodies back together than it is to put the mind back together. Your success rate in the ER will be very, very high. The success rate with schizophrenics is less than twenty percent, and that's just successful functioning and independent living, not cure. Your success rate is going to be far higher, even working in trauma, probably north of 90%. That's especially true with the advent of 'advanced life support' instead of 'scoop and run' in terms of ambulance service."

"That's not a consolation with regard to Angie."

"Mental health problems take a serious toll on loved ones, and that's before any social stigma associated with mental illness comes into play. Suddenly, you're shunned because you're caring for someone with mental health issues. Mostly, it's out of ignorance and fear, but that doesn't make it hurt any less. Education helps some, but social conditioning takes a long, long time to change."

"As I said, this sucks."

"And I can't disagree. Are you heading straight from here to see her pastor?"

"Yes, though I think I have about an hour to kill, so I'll probably head to the church and pray until it's time for our meeting."

"The same church in Loveland, right?"

"Yes. And then I'm meeting my sister and her husband for lunch in Rutherford."

"OK. Do me a favor and call me to let me know what Angie's pastor says, and then we'll set up the meeting."

"Will do."

Doctor Mercer walked me out of her office, and I headed out of the building and got into my car for the drive to Loveland, where I parked in the church parking lot, put on my cassock, and headed into the church to pray.

"Subdeacon Michael?" Father Stephen said quietly to me about forty-five minutes later.

"Father, bless!" I replied, cupping my hands for a blessing and kissing his hand after he made the sign of the cross.

"Shall we sit here?" he asked, indicating the bench near the wall. "We can move to my office if someone comes along to pray."

I nodded, and we sat down on the bench, our backs against the wall of the nave.

"I'm not your confessor, but I'm going to say the prayers before confession so that this conversation is completely private between the two of us, and nothing either of us says can be revealed unless you reveal it."

"Thank you," I said.

He put his *epitrachil* around my shoulders and said the prayers, then we both relaxed.

"What have you decided?" he asked.

"To keep my promise to Elizaveta," I replied. "I wasn't completely sure until about an hour ago because of how I felt, no, feel, about Angie."

"I believe His Grace will be pleased to hear that, but he will also have concern for Angela's spiritual and mental health, just as I do. When do you propose to answer her?"

"It's a delicate issue, and her psychologist, Doctor Mercer, would like to talk to you and me, and possibly Father Nicholas and Vladyka ARKADY as well, to determine the best course of action and do our best to help Angie through this."

"She's worried about another episode, isn't she?"

I nodded, "Or worse -- the onset of full-blown psychosis. So far, Angie has the symptoms of schizophrenia but hasn't had a complete break with reality. Doctor Mercer is afraid that could happen when I tell her my decision. The other issue is that I'm a trigger for Angie's episodes, and it might be best for me to not see her again. On the other hand, that might cause Angie to have that complete break with reality and require her to be institutionalized, at least in the short term."

"Lord, have mercy!" Father Stephen exclaimed softly.

"Yeah," I sighed. "As I said to Doctor Mercer, damned if I do, damned if I don't."

"If there were ever a time for Biblical literalism, it's now. Oh, to be able to simply pray and cast out the demon that is tormenting her."

"Can I ask about that? It's one thing that I don't remember being addressed in Sunday School or a homily."

"You mean why Jesus didn't send the man to a psychologist or psychiatrist?" he asked with a soft smile.

"They didn't exist, and Jesus would have had to speak to the people at a level they understood."

"Or, perhaps, that is a feature of Jesus' true humanity -- that He had only the knowledge of the society in which He found Himself. Remember, He set aside the prerogatives of his deity, and there were things He, being fully human, didn't know. How that works, I won't claim to understand. We have, as I'm sure you assumed, done all the prayers for healing and anointed her, as has the bishop on his visits here. For whatever reason, she has this cross to bear, and you with her, to some extent."

"And that's the question, really -- am I Simon of Cyrene? Can I actually carry that cross?"

"I'm not going to give you the standard platitudes about God not giving you more than you can bear, even though that's theologically defensible."

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," I replied.

"That's what I was referring to, but not everyone is called to bear those kinds of burdens. I got the sense from our phone call that you feel obligated to help care for Angela."

"I'm not sure 'obligated' is the right word, nor is 'compelled'. I care for her immensely and don't want to see her suffer, which encourages me to act in whatever way I can to help her. But, as I said to Doctor Mercer, my friend Clarissa got it right -- my calling to be a doctor is stronger than anything else in my life."

"Father Nicholas, Father Herman, and Vladyka ARKADY all agree."

"I'm not surprised all of you have talked."

"You are a candidate for the diaconate, so that would be normal. It was actually a question His Grace asked of Father Nicholas and Father Herman -- could you devote yourself to the duties of the diaconate when it was not your first calling? They both agreed you could. Are you trying to say you considered giving up on your medical career to help Angela?"

"The thought certainly crossed my mind," I replied. "It would have meant giving up everything -- being a doctor, being a deacon, my betrothal to Elizaveta, and probably a whole lot more. It sounds selfish, but I just couldn't do that."

"Do you know the 'trolley problem' thought experiment?"

"I do," I said, "and I know the correct answer, too."

"That there IS no objectively correct answer, or is this a 'James T. Kirk reprogramming the computer' answer?"

"Actually, if I am in a situation where I am forced to choose against my will, then I have no ethical or moral responsibility for the outcome. So, the answer is that it's an invalid question. It's no different, in my opinion, from forcing someone to pick which of two other captives will die. There is no moral or ethical responsibility either way because there is no Free Will."

"An interesting non-solution, but one with which I can't argue, as I believe in Free Will, just as you do. But you don't ACTUALLY believe that, as it applies to the current situation, do you?"

I smiled wryly, "No. I'm going to feel responsible for what happens to Angie no matter what decisions I or others make. Just as I would in the case of selecting between one or five deaths. But that's different from being responsible from a moral or ethical perspective."

"What would you do?" Father Stephen asked. "Hypothetically?"

"Probably sacrifice the one to save the five, but even slight variations of the problem make that answer suspect. What if I know the one person, and they're very dear to me? Or, what if that one person has some immense value to society? We're in 'overcrowded lifeboat' territory now."

"Some die, or all die, and somebody has to choose."

"We've had those kinds of questions in psychology and philosophy classes -- how do you value an individual? And I'm going to run into that someday in some ER somewhere. It's called triage."

"When that day comes," Father Stephen said soberly, "as I am sure it must, please make sure you discuss it with your spiritual father. I fear, otherwise, it will eat you alive."

"According to Doctor Evgeni, there are clear protocols for making those kinds of decisions, precisely to limit ethical or moral culpability. According to him, that works for keeping the law away but doesn't assuage the conscience of someone who has to decide who lives and who dies when there are limited resources."

"It shouldn't, for anyone with an actual conscience."

"Which leads right back to the situation with Angie," I said.

"I get the sense that you aren't as sure of your decision as your initial comment might have implied."

"I'm not convinced there isn't a way out."

"You, like Kirk, don't believe in the 'no-win' scenario?" Father Stephen asked.

"Like many things, my belief, or lack thereof, has nothing to do with reality. My struggle is with admitting that we're in a 'no-win' scenario, even when the evidence points that way. And I feel as if I'm putting myself in a place to 'win' at Angie's expense."

"I assume from everything you've said, survivor's guilt was discussed at some point, either in class or your talks with your counselors or Father Nicholas."

"Yes, and that's probably what I'm afraid of -- that I'll have a happy, productive life at the expense of casting Angie aside."

"But, to go back to one of our ethical problems from before -- you aren't pushing her out of the lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. You're leaving her in the hands of her secular counselors, her pastor, and her family. It would be different if you were her only potential caregiver."

"Which doesn't make it any easier."

"If it did, Subdeacon, I'd worry about your soul."

XLV. I'd much rather have a cure

January 12, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"How are you, Mik?" Jocelyn asked when I arrived back at the dorm.

"I feel like I've gone fifteen rounds with Ali."

"Would you even last one round?"

"No, of course not, but I STILL feel like I was in the ring for the full fifteen."

"I know you usually talk to Clarissa, but she's with Abby. I have an ear if you want."

"I love you, Jos; that's never changed. And I can use an ear."

"Then come on," she said. "Your room?"

"We'll leave the door open if you don't trust yourself!"

"You're the least likely person on the planet to cheat, Mik!"

"That kind of thinking is what will get me into trouble," I replied.

We went into my room, and I left the door partway open. I put on *Who's Last* by The Who, and we sat down on the couch.

"So, what has you feeling like Sonny Liston in his second fight?" Jocelyn asked.

"Is that the one that was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*? The one framed in your dad's den?"

"Yep. First round. Liston never knew what hit him. Ali didn't realize how hard he'd hit Liston."

"That about sums up my situation."

"Who beat you up? Wait, don't answer. You beat yourself up."

"Yes."

"Mik, you've wanted to be Doctor Mike since fourth grade. Now, because of Angie, you think you're being selfish?"

"That's pretty much the bottom line. I feel like a jerk putting that ahead of everything."

"No, you feel like a jerk putting being Doctor Mike ahead of *Angie*."

"Doctor Mercer said it wasn't real because of Angie's condition. Intellectually, I know she's right, but my heart just doesn't see it."

"And 'fantasy Angie' was no more real than 'fantasy Tasha'."

I smirked, "Tasha was BETTER than 'fantasy Tasha'!"

Jocelyn laughed, "I didn't mean sex, you nut! I meant your vision of who she was."

"I suppose that's true."

"And I have to ask -- she was THAT good?"

"You have NO idea," I grinned.

"That might have been the first and only time in history that a guy's reality outdid his fantasy!"

"All things being equal, my fantasies were pretty tame."

"Actually, knowing you as well as I did when we went through puberty and High School, that doesn't surprise me."

"The fundamental problem is that pretty much any decision I make will have lasting, potentially devastating, consequences."

"Wait!" Jocelyn protested. "I thought you said you HAD decided?"

"I am going to marry Elizaveta, but that leaves the question of what kind of relationship I'm going to have with Angie, if any. I'm a major trigger for her meltdowns, but not seeing her could be an even bigger problem than continuing to see her. And continuing to see her after I'm married presents its own set of concerns, both for Angie and for Elizaveta."

"Not to change the subject, but isn't that a potential problem for you and me? And for you and Clarissa?"

"It's a bit complicated because I also have to avoid anything which looks like it might be inappropriate due to my candidacy for ordination to the diaconate."

"Not to be a bitch, but you and Clarissa spend time together behind closed doors."

"I know, and I do that knowing that it's a potential concern for people from church, but not with Elizaveta."

Jocelyn smirked, "Because your 'pussy cat' has no idea that you played with THAT pussy!"

I couldn't help but laugh, "True. You are one of the very few people who know about that, and it has to remain that way. Elizaveta knows I was with other girls, but she doesn't know names. Well, she knows I was with Tasha because she assumed so, and I'm positive Tasha confirmed that. Elizaveta suspects I was with you. Well, she did once I admitted that I'd been with more than one girl."

"Because she'd never, ever suspect you were intimate with the hot lesbian girl!"

"Hot?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Forget it!" Jocelyn replied.

"Coward!" I teased.

"I'll do THAT right after you give Robby a blowjob!"

"Pass," I replied flatly.

"Figures," Jocelyn replied smugly.

"So what happens now?"

"Father Stephen and Doctor Mercer are going to confer, and then Father Stephen is going to speak to Father Nicholas and Bishop ARKADY. I suspect all of us will get into a room together and decide what's best for Angie. In the end, it's her

mom who is going to have to care for Angie, with help from Doctor Mercer, Father Stephen, and whoever her psychiatrist is."

"You don't know?"

"I don't believe Doctor Mercer has ever used his name, and I'm certainly not going to ask. It's none of my business, really. Doctor Mercer only shares things with me because Angie's mom was willing to sign a release allowing it."

We were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Yes?" I called out.

"Mike, I need...oh, sorry, I didn't realize you had someone in here with you."

"It's OK," Jocelyn said. "I need to go move my laundry from the washer to the dryer. Mik, I'll be back in a bit."

"Sounds good, Jos. Gene, come on in."

She left, closing the door behind her, and Gene sat down on the opposite couch.

"I need some advice."

I smiled, "The doctor is in. That'll be 5¢, please."

He laughed, "Funny, you don't look like Lucy van Pelt!"

"And I'm happy about that. What's up?"

"Can this be totally confidential?"

"And unofficial?"

"Yes. José and Robby suggested I talk to you and said you'd probably agree."

"All I can say is 'tell me', and then we'll figure out how to solve the problem."

"I want to change rooms. I'm pretty sure my roommate and his girlfriend are using hard drugs, opium for sure."

"Sweet-smelling smoke?" I asked.

"Yeah. And I'm pretty sure I walked in on them doing lines -- mirror with white residue and a straw on the table."

His roommate was a Junior who hadn't been on our floor for his first two years at Taft. And the last thing I wanted was police involvement, but there really wasn't much I could do about that. On the other hand, I could simply endorse Gene moving, as there was another guy whose roommate had dropped out after one semester. All it would take is my signature on a housing form which said he and his roommate had irreconcilable differences and that mediation was unlikely to resolve them. On the other hand, if it ever got out that Gene had reported the situation, I could get in serious trouble for not dealing with it.

"Is your roommate in your room now?"

"No, he and Beth are out."

"Let's walk down there. If I don't see or smell anything, I'll endorse a move request you file with campus housing, and we'll leave it at that. I mean, unless you want me to report this and have the dean call the cops."

"No way. I don't want to be a narc! I just don't want to be around that stuff."

"You know if I notice anything, then I absolutely have to report it. You don't have anything in your room that would get you in trouble, right?"

He laughed, "Just my stack of *Playboy* magazines, which I read for the articles, of course."

"Of course," I chuckled. "Those aren't against the rules, though it would be against the rules to have, say, a centerfold hanging in your room."

"You wouldn't mind giving me a thirty-second head start, would you?" he asked.

I laughed, "No, I wouldn't mind. Go on. I'll come by your room in a couple of minutes."

"Thanks. Robby said you were totally cool."

"I try my best."

He left, and I waited three minutes by my watch, then walked down the hallway to Gene's room. I walked in and didn't see anything obvious in the common area, and when I walked close to Jamie, the roommate's door, I smelled a VERY faint odor.

"Incense," I said aloud.

"Really?"

"As far as you and I know," I replied. "Go to campus housing and get the form to change rooms. Fill it out, cite 'irreconcilable differences', and I'll sign off. There's another room on this floor, and Ned is pretty cool. He's a Freshman math major,

minoring in computers. His 'drug of choice' is Mountain Dew, and the only thing I could imagine he snorts is Chee-tos dust!"

Gene laughed, "Talk about frying your brain!"

"I know, right?"

"Thanks, Mike."

"You're welcome."

I went back to my room, and Jocelyn came in about five minutes later.

"Everything OK?"

"Just a room change; no big deal."

"Can I talk to you about something?"

"If you can't, who can?"

"Clarissa," Jocelyn replied with just a hint of jealousy. "But that's my own damned fault."

"I thought we agreed to let the past stay in the past and focus on the present and the future. We've made good progress, Jos. So what can I help you with?"

"I'm not sure Bill is the right guy."

"What brought this on? I thought things were going well."

"I'm not sure. I just keep getting this feeling that it's a dead end."

"Have you talked about the future?" I asked.

"Only in a general way because I still have another year before I graduate and then three years of law school."

"I take it you can't see yourself spending the rest of your life with him."

"No. I don't know..." she sighed. "I guess I don't feel close to him. Not even close like you and me, and nothing like you and Clarissa."

"Will you do me one important favor? Please?"

"What?"

"Stop comparing yourself to Clarissa. You are special to me, and you always will be."

"But..."

"No 'buts' about it," I replied. "You are special. Period. I guess I'm probably the wrong person to ask about that one because I'm marrying for pragmatic purposes, and I'm marrying the one person I didn't drive away with my warnings about how much it's going to suck for the next five years."

Jocelyn smirked, "I thought it was how much SHE was going to suck..."

I chuckled, "I prefer intercourse, and you know it! But the point is, my heart isn't guiding me. If it was..."

"You'd drop all of it for Angie. Which is why you said you felt like Sonny Liston."

"Pretty much. But, in the end, my heart has to belong to Elizaveta, even if getting to that point is a long journey. You, on the other hand, need emotional closeness. You never got that from Carl, did you?"

"No, and that's probably why you were my first lover instead of him."

"But you and Bill..."

"Yes, but it's just sex, not making love."

"Ouch. Even when you and I were at our lowest point, it was NEVER 'just sex' for you, even though there were times you pretended it was. And even when you were trying to hurt me, you faked 'just sex'; you didn't actually do it. Was it ever 'making love' with Bill?"

"I thought so, at least at first. Now, I'm sure it wasn't. I think it was a mistake."

"If that's true, you don't need my advice."

Jocelyn smiled, "I think I just needed to be able to say it out loud, and I knew you'd understand."

"Because Jos and Mik know each other really, really well."

"What time will you be back tonight?"

"Well, I have Vespers and then dinner at Elizaveta's house. I'm usually back by about 10:00pm."

"Be here for me?"

"Always! I'm actually going to leave in a few minutes, so I have time to talk to Father Nicholas before Vespers."

"I've seen you in less than you'll have on when you change!"

"Quite true, but you know the concern."

"I do. I'll see you when you get back."

We hugged, and she left my room, closing the door behind her. I changed into my usual attire for church -- black slacks and a black button-down shirt. I turned off the stereo, put on my coat, hat, and gloves, then walked out of my room. I locked the door, took the elevator down to the lobby, then walked out to the parking lot and got into my car. Twenty minutes later, Father Nicholas and I were standing together, in our cassocks, in the nave.

"Do you need confession?" he asked.

"Constantly," I replied.

He laughed, "Yes, of course, but is there anything major that we need to deal with in your interior life?"

"Not that requires confession, though Father Stephen treated our conversation as confession."

"Wise. We should do that as well."

I nodded, and he went to the vestry and returned wearing his *epitrachil*. As Father Stephen had done earlier, he put it around my shoulders and said the prayers for the beginning of confession. Once they were completed, we went to sit on benches against the wall of the nave.

"Father Stephen will be in touch," I said. "He was going to speak with Doctor Mercer, then with you and His Grace. His goal is to work out the best course of action for Angie's spiritual health, in addition to her mental health."

"I take it this means you've made your decision?"

I nodded, "And in the process learned something very, very important."

"What's that?"

"The true value of spiritual discipline -- constant prayer cleared my mind and allowed me to focus on school, rather than obsessing over the situation with Angie, and then, the answer simply presented itself."

"When did the answer come to you?"

"As soon as I got into my car to drive to Milford, but I wasn't sure until I walked into Doctor Mercer's office."

"As His Grace said, the spiritual riches and wisdom of the Church are there, if you are willing to make use of them. Think about what happened and lay it out for me."

"By quieting my mind with prayer, I allowed myself to focus on my school work and didn't obsess over the situation with Angie. And by quieting my mind, I let the Holy Spirit work instead of allowing the world to drown out that 'still, small voice'. And I don't mean in the sense that I heard an actual voice, just that the answer came unbidden, without obsession. Combining prayer with fasting helped bring my body, heart, mind, and soul into sync, though my heart isn't completely in sync because of how much I care for Angie."

"There's nothing wrong with that, Subdeacon. In fact, when properly directed, it's a sign of a pastoral heart. The question is, have you pulled back from inappropriate feelings for her?"

"Will you accept that I'm working on it?"

"Yes. I wouldn't expect you to be able to simply turn off those kinds of feelings. But I also know you well enough that the spiritual discipline has helped you control those feelings sufficiently to move forward."

"I'm going to need your help in dealing with the fallout."

Father Nicholas nodded, "I understand. I know we'll probably hear this from the psychologist, but how bad?"

"Five percent of schizophrenics commit suicide, and only twenty percent are able to function in a limited fashion. She hasn't developed psychosis, but this might be enough to push her over the edge and require psychoactive drugs and institutionalization."

"Lord, have mercy!"

"You haven't had to deal with anything like this?"

"Nothing like this. The only referrals I've ever done have been for depression, and I had one person seriously contemplating suicide about ten years ago. I have no experience in this area."

"Sadly, I do now. As Doctor Mercer said, fixing bodies is much, much easier than fixing minds."

"Of that, I have no doubt. I've spoken to Doctor Evgeni at length over the years. Do you know when I'll hear from Father Stephen?"

"I'd suspect soon. He was planning to call Doctor Mercer this afternoon."

"You can go back to your usual fasting rule, but I'd like you to keep the prayer rule for now."

"Yes, Father," I replied.

"Shall we vest?" he asked.

We got up from the bench and began our usual routine, which culminated about ninety minutes later when we removed our vestments after Vespers. I received Father's blessing and then left for dinner at Elizaveta's house.

When I arrived, she greeted me with a soft kiss, and we went immediately to the dining room to have dinner. After dinner, I had coffee with Viktor while Elizaveta and her mom did the dishes, and then Elizaveta and I took a walk in the light snow, which had begun while we were eating. As usual for our walks, we were mostly quiet while we walked hand-in-hand, and when we returned to the house, we sat in front of a roaring fire with mugs of hot chocolate. We shared another soft kiss when I left to head back to campus, where Jocelyn was waiting for me.

"That bad?" I asked, noting the look on her face and her bloodshot eyes.

She nodded, and we went into my room. I closed the door most of the way, and we sat side-by-side on the couch. I considered my options and very quickly decided on a course of action -- I put my arm around Jocelyn's shoulders. She leaned into me, drew her legs up on the couch, and sighed deeply.

"What happened?"

"Bill accused me of not really trying and of being hung up on you."

Suddenly, I wasn't so sure my arm around Jocelyn was a good idea, but I didn't flinch.

"And?" I asked apprehensively.

"I walked away from him, came back to the dorm, went to my room, and cried."

Which told me one or both of his accusations were accurate.

"Was it just that, or did you talk about it?"

"We didn't talk," she replied. "He just said those things, and I walked away."

"Were you really trying with him? It looked to me as if you were, though we didn't really talk about it."

"I don't know for sure, which means I probably wasn't."

"And the other thing?"

"I told him all about our trio after our triple date with Dale and how I hoped to get close to you again."

"We always did come as a matched set," I replied.

"Until I blew things up."

"I have as much responsibility for what happened between us, and maybe more, because of what I did. I wasn't there for you the way you needed me to be there."

"And that's what has you so freaked out about how you're handling things with Angie."

"Yes, but we're talking about you right now; I have a Father Confessor, you don't. Well, your church does have confession, but you never took advantage of it, if I recall correctly."

"We do, but I never saw the point, even though you seemed to benefit from it."

"Did you tell Bill that we were intimate?"

"No, but I think he suspected, especially after I told him we were trying to restore our relationship to what it was before my accident. How is Elizaveta dealing with you having close female friends?"

"She's a bit wary, but as I said, she doesn't think Clarissa is a risk, Tasha is engaged, and you were dating Bill."

"And if she saw us right now?"

"She'd probably be upset, but you looked like you needed it."

"I did. I can move if you want."

"Stay," I replied. "I'll tell Elizaveta about it tomorrow and explain."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

We sat together for about ten minutes, and then Jocelyn said she was going to bed. We hugged, she left, I said my prayers, and got into bed.



January 13, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Jocelyn broke up with Bill last night," I said to Elizaveta as we headed to Tasha's apartment after church on Sunday morning.

"Why?"

"She doesn't think he's the right guy. She came to talk to me after I got back to my dorm last night, and we sat on my couch with the door open, but I had my arm around her shoulders to comfort her."

"Why did she need comforting if she broke up with him?!" Elizaveta demanded.

"Because he blamed her for the relationship not working. She became upset and went back to her room to cry. She was waiting for me when I got back because she needed someone to talk to. I am her oldest and dearest friend."

"You have quite a few friends who are girls."

I nodded, "I do, and you and I have talked about that. I told you the story of how Jocelyn and I met in kindergarten and then how Dale became our friend in second grade."

"Mike, you know what you did is not appropriate for clergy, sitting with your arm around a girl who isn't your wife or daughter."

"I know, but I felt the circumstances warranted doing that, and nobody in the dorm would think there was anything going on."

"But you have to be careful at all times, Mike! And I really don't think you should be hugging other girls, even as friends. It just seems wrong."

"Are you angry with me?"

"No; well, not unless you've done something that should make me angry."

There was the whole situation with Angie, but I had no idea how to broach it or how Elizaveta would react. I was uncomfortable with keeping that from her, but I was also uncomfortable with telling her. And there was a chance of her being unhappy, or even angry, no matter which way I decided. It was another potential 'no-win' scenario related to Angie.

"I haven't, at least as far as I can tell. I do need to share something with you, but it's completely confidential."

"What's that?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I spoke to Doctor Mercer and Father Stephen from Saint George in Loveland about Angie. She's struggling and might be on the verge of another breakdown."

"Why?"

"It's all part of her condition -- what she wants versus what's possible. We talked about how I'm both a help and a hindrance, and Doctor Mercer and Father Stephen are trying to decide if I'm more a hindrance than a help, but also what would happen if I simply stopped having any contact with her. The problem is, no matter what I do or what Doctor Mercer or Father Stephen do, it could hurt her very badly and make the situation worse."

"She wants you, doesn't she?" Elizaveta asked.

"Doctor Mercer made an important point to me. Nothing that occurred between Angie and me was 'real' in the way you and I would define it. Angie's reality is not the same as ours, and anything she might say or do has to be understood in that light. Doctor Mercer explained a lot about Angie's condition, which I didn't know before."

"I don't understand what you mean when you say her reality isn't the same as ours."

"Her condition causes her to see the world in a way nobody else sees it, and she acts on that altered reality. Her actions might even look very normal to most people, but she's doing them because of how she sees the world, not how it really is. What Doctor Mercer said is that people with Angie's condition observe the world but do not process it into meaning, or if they do, that meaning is completely divorced from reality. She did give you a compliment."

"Oh?"

"When we were discussing me being a doctor, Doctor Mercer made the point that I'd either refused to have relationships with girls or actively tried to chase them away until I found one I couldn't chase away!"

Elizaveta laughed softly, "I chased YOU!"

"Yes, you did. But you weren't scared off by the future, even knowing how difficult it might be."

"Dad always says you have to work very hard for anything truly worthwhile."

"I'd have to agree," I replied.

"So what are you going to do? I know you love Angie; you told me that."

"In the end, however I'm involved with her is up to Doctor Mercer, Father Stephen, and Vladyka ARKADY. I'm not her pastor, nor am I her counselor, and I need to listen to what they say so I can do whatever is best for her spiritual and mental health. And no matter what path we choose, it could end very badly for Angie."

"It's just so strange."

"I know. Father Stephen made the comment that he wished it was like in the Gospel, where he could say a prayer and drive out the demon who was tormenting Angie. We're in a situation where nobody knows how to cure her, or if a cure is even possible. There are studies and experiments, but eighty percent of people with Angie's condition can't even hold a job or care for themselves. That's likely her future, even though right now she appears to be better and living a relatively normal life."

"That's scary."

"It is. And nobody knows what causes it, either, which is even scarier. Usually, it doesn't show up in women until their late twenties, when they start having the symptoms Angie started having at eighteen or nineteen. In my Abnormal Psych book, it said that men tend to have more severe symptoms initially, though they tend to attenuate with age. With women, it's the other way around -- the initial symptoms are like Angie's, but they get progressively worse."

"What about medication?"

"There are drugs which can control it to a point, but they basically turn her into a zombie. If you take them long-term, they have serious side effects, which contribute to a shorter life expectancy. There is also a much higher risk of suicide; my textbook says the estimates are between five and ten percent of people with the condition commit suicide. Another book I checked said that it's around five percent."

"That's what everyone is worried about, isn't it?"

"Yes. And she stopped taking her medication, too, which is another symptom of her condition."

"Doesn't someone monitor her?"

"Yes, but remember, she seems normal, so most likely, she just tells her mom she's taking the drugs but doesn't. I'm sure she'll be watched more closely now."

Which, I realized, meant Angie would know I told Doctor Mercer about not taking her medication, though I wondered if Doctor Mercer had somehow obfuscated it in some way.

"Just remember -- none of this can be shared," I continued. "Technically, I shouldn't have shared it with you, but I felt I had to tell you what was going on. There will, in the future, be pastoral or other issues of which I become aware and have to be involved in, which I won't be able to share."

"Both of the matushkas told me that, and Maria told me that Doctor Evgeni wasn't able to share about specific patients."

"I'm only sharing now because you know how I feel about Angie and about our history."

"But you said it wasn't real."

"For *her*," I replied. "It was completely real for me. I just didn't understand what was actually going on."

We arrived in town, and I parked in the campus lot. We got out of the car and walked hand-in-hand towards Tasha's apartment over the Quick Mart.

"How do you feel?" Elizaveta asked.

"I think I finally came down to 'helpless'. I hope to never feel that way again, but I keep being told I'll have situations like that as a doctor -- when I'm helpless to do anything to save a patient. And that's when I'm going to need you and the Church to help me."

"I knew that going into this, and you didn't chase me away!"

"I didn't try all that hard," I chuckled. "I simply didn't pay attention to you."

"Try that now, husband, and you'll be in BIG trouble!"

"I wouldn't think of it," I replied with a grin.

Elizaveta squeezed my hand, and we walked up the stairs to Tasha's apartment.



January 15, 1985, Columbus, Ohio

"Thank you all for coming to Columbus," Vladyka ARKADY said.

"I think I should have worn black instead of maroon," Doctor Mercer said quietly to me.

"Then you'd look like a nun," I replied.

"No thanks!" she responded quietly.

"Vladyka," I said. "This is Doctor Fran Mercer. Doctor Mercer, His Grace, Bishop ARKADY of the Orthodox Church in America."

"Your Grace," Doctor Mercer said. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"And I you, Doctor," Bishop ARKADY replied. "There are tea and coffee on the side table, as well as a pitcher of ice water. We'll sit on the couches to have our discussion."

Father Stephen, Father Nicholas, Doctor Mercer, and I each fixed ourselves a drink, and I poured tea for the bishop and brought it to him in his chair, which faced the two couches set at an angle next to each other.

"Doctor," Vladyka ARKADY said, "I understand you have permission from Angela's mother to speak with us."

"Yes, Your Grace, I do."

"Then, please, tell us about her illness and how we can help."

Doctor Mercer repeated much of the conversation I'd had with her but added some additional information which we hadn't discussed but which I'd read in the book at the library or my Abnormal Psych book.

"There is one thing which I didn't mention to Mike...I assume it's OK to call him that, or should I use a title?"

"'Mike' is fine," Vladyka ARKADY replied. "A subdeacon is a member of the minor clergy and, as such, his title is generally not acknowledged in a formal way outside Church circles."

"The thing I didn't mention to him is that the State of Ohio would not agree that Angie could give consent to marry, or, for that matter, engage in sexual relations, because of her condition. In addition, Family Services would likely intervene if her legal guardians -- her parents -- tried to give consent."

"Forever?" I asked.

"Once a patient receives a diagnosis of this kind, it would take a competency hearing, and that would require testimony from Angie's psychiatrist and myself. Some of the things the court would review would be her following her treatment plan and the length of time she had been free of mood-altering or psychoactive medication. As I mentioned, she stopped taking her medication without consulting her psychiatrist or me, and she hid that fact from both of us and her mother."

"Is she following her treatment now?" Father Stephen asked.

"Yes, but not willingly. Her mother supervises her taking her anti-depressants."

"I take it she's upset with me for ratting her out?" I asked.

"Actually, her psychiatrist ordered a blood test to check her medication levels. That's a normal thing to do to make sure her dosage is correct and that she isn't suffering from any issues with her blood chemistry."

"Thank you," I replied.

"She is, on the other hand, unhappy that you told me that she'd driven by herself to McKinley."

"I don't see how I had any choice."

"You didn't," Father Stephen quickly interjected.

"Exactly right, Father," Vladyka ARKADY said, then turned to Doctor Mercer, "Do you have a proposed way forward, Doctor?"

"I believe the best approach, for now, is to tell Angie what I just said about the State of Ohio. Once her parents became her legal guardians, she lost the right to marry without their consent unless she was deemed to be cured, which, as I explained, isn't the case and is unlikely ever to be the case. And, I'll add, proving a cure is a very high bar to clear."

The bishop nodded, "That sounds wise, as it allows her to direct her anger, if she is angry, at someone other than Subdeacon Michael. And her treatment?"

"Will continue as it has until new symptoms arise or she has another break."

"And you say that's likely?"

"Very," Doctor Mercer confirmed. "As I said, only twenty percent of individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia are able to care for themselves and hold a job. So far, that's where Angie is. But as I also said, with females, the early symptoms are mild and grow progressively worse. Given how young Angie was when she first exhibited signs -- possibly as early as age sixteen -- it's very, very likely she won't be among that twenty percent by the time she turns thirty and will need constant care. Her parents are her caregivers."

"What happens when they pass?" I asked.

"If her brother is unable or unwilling to care for her, she would go into a state program. That usually means a group home, but we try to avoid that if other solutions present themselves."

"Her parents are Roman Catholic, correct, Father Stephen?" Vladyka ARKADY inquired.

"Yes, and they are semi-regular church-goers. Her mother brings her to Vespers on Wednesday and Saturday and to Matins and Liturgy on Sunday, as well as the main feasts. I've been in touch with them and offered any assistance they need, which our parish can provide -- meals, transportation, a relief caregiver so they can go out, and so on."

"Does her mother come to the services?" Vladyka asked.

"On occasion, such as Holy Week and Pascha, when the services are long or at odd times. Otherwise, she goes to a local coffee shop during Vespers or on Sunday mornings; she attends a Roman Catholic Mass while Angie is in church."

"Is that a problem?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"By no means," Vladyka ARKADY answered quickly. "My question was simply for my own edification. We would never treat Angela differently because her parents are not Orthodox -- it's only a matter of understanding their faith. Father, has their parish offered any assistance?"

"Yes, and it's basically similar to what we've offered. I've spoken to her priest, Father Jameson, at Immaculate Heart of Mary, and we'll coördinate as needed. It's also the case that the Archdiocese of Cincinnati has several group homes

which they run and which, when the time comes, are likely a far better option than a state-run facility. One of them is not far from Christ the Savior, which would be very convenient for them to help her get to services. But as I understand it, her parents are in excellent health and are only in their late forties."

"And Subdeacon Michael's involvement, Doctor?" Vladyka ARKADY asked.

"I think that remains to be seen. For now, I want to talk with Angie about the consent issue. That will give her an answer to her question without putting Mike on the spot. How she reacts and responds will dictate our next steps. I want to warn you that me telling her that she's unable to marry will very likely trigger some kind of negative symptoms, but there really is no way around that."

"Subdeacon, what does Elizaveta know?"

"As much as I was able to tell her without violating Angie's privacy, although I certainly skated very close to the line on that. I didn't tell her about Angie's visit, nor that Angie asked me to marry her, but Elizaveta knows I had, and have, strong feelings for Angie."

"And her comfort level?"

"I'd say, at least for now, she's fine with my interactions with Angie. I did tell her that Angie's behavior while she was at William Howard Taft was mostly a product of her condition, which is what Doctor Mercer said was the case. That, I think, allayed her concerns."

"Father Nicholas," the bishop said, "I'd like you to speak to Elizaveta on this issue, just to gauge her reaction to Subdeacon Michael being involved in Angela's care. If she's comfortable, I'll give my blessing for him to help in any way Doctor Mercer feels appropriate, within the bounds of his obligations for propriety as a

member of the clergy. Father Stephen, please continue to do everything possible to care for Angela spiritually and, as you've already begun, for her physical needs as well. And please continue to work with Doctor Mercer. Subdeacon, please take your direction from Father Stephen, who will consult with Father Nicholas."

"Yes, Vladyka," Father Nicholas and Father Stephen both said.

"Yes, Vladyka," I said.

"Is there anything else which needs my attention?" he asked.

There wasn't, so after the two priests and I received his blessing, we left his office.

"Is this normal?" Doctor Mercer asked. "That a bishop would be this involved?"

"We have far fewer faithful than the Romans do," Father Nicholas said. "So our bishops are much more involved in the lives of our faithful than you might be used to with Roman Catholics. In addition, Mike is a candidate for the diaconate, which means that this involves the life and ministry of one of the bishop's clergymen. The bishop will always be involved in a case like that."

"If only more religious leaders behaved the way your bishop does, I think long-term care for people with mental illness would be vastly improved."

"I'd much rather have a cure," I replied.

Doctor Mercer nodded, "So would I."

XLVI. Love Your Neighbor

January 17, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"My parents were kicked out of the church because they wouldn't make me stop coming to Saint Michael the Archangel," Mark said when I greeted him and Alyssa on Thursday afternoon.

"Are they going to the Lutheran Church?"

"Starting on Sunday, yes."

"What about yours, Alyssa?"

"They're supposed to have a meeting with the elders on Saturday morning. I invited them to Saint Michael, and Mark's parents suggested they go to the Lutheran church."

"But it's not causing either of you any problems with your friends, right?"

"Just one couple who go to our old church. They won't hang out with us any longer, but we have plenty of other friends."

"I'm really sorry this has happened."

"What would happen if the situation was reversed?" Alyssa asked.

"We'd never kick someone out of the church for something their kids had done, nor would we treat anyone who left voluntarily like a pariah. Most of the time, it's because they marry outside the Church. As for those who leave for other

reasons, they usually cut themselves off from us, not the other way around. That said, there are some fundamentalists, especially Greek Old Calendarists, who not only reject non-Orthodox but most other Orthodox Christians and would never enter their churches or allow any Orthodox clergy to enter theirs. But by their very nature, they're schismatic, which makes them not Orthodox, despite claims to the contrary. Anyway, shall we get started?"

Our hour together was spent discussing the Second, Third, and Fourth Ecumenical Councils, focusing on the proclamation of Mary as *Theotokos*, the addition of the clause about the Holy Spirit to the Creed, the rejection of *monophysitism*, and the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ. It was a lot to cover in an hour, but we had a lot of material to cover before Pascha, which was just over ten weeks away, and time seemed accelerated ever since Elizaveta and I had started seeing each other.

"I think my head is going to explode!" Mark said.

"We'll review next week, but you don't have to know this well enough to teach it, and there won't be a quiz!"

"Something for which we are eternally grateful!" Alyssa said with a soft laugh.

"You're making good progress. How are you doing with your prayer and fasting rules?"

"Fine," Mark said. "Our parents are supportive, so we don't have trouble at home."

"Good. Is there anything you want to ask at this point?"

"No," they both said.

I nodded and walked them to the door. We said 'goodbye', and I went upstairs to get my balalaika. I brought it down to the music room to practice the things which Doctor Blahnik had taught me at my lesson earlier in the day. When I finished, I headed back to campus to join the gang for dinner and then spent the evening studying and doing homework.



January 18, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"You're coming with us," I said firmly.

"But I don't have a date!" Jocelyn protested. "I'll be like a fifth wheel!"

"You will not!" Clarissa declared. "Robby, Lee, and Sophia will be there, in addition to José, Dona, Abby, and Elizaveta."

"But I'm still the only one without a date!" she protested.

"Interested in robbing the cradle?" I asked with a smirk.

"Why am I suddenly afraid?" Jocelyn asked.

"Trust me?"

"Implicitly, but that doesn't mean that smirk doesn't worry me!"

"Wait here!"

I left my room and walked down the hall to Gene's room and knocked on his door.

"Hey, Mike! What's up?"

"What are you doing tonight?"

"I was going to grab dinner and then watch TV; why?"

"Come out with us," I said. "We're going to have dinner and then go see a band that my friend Milena recommended."

"I'd be the only one without a date, wouldn't I?"

"No; Jocelyn Mills broke up with her boyfriend, so she doesn't have a date, either."

"She's an upperclassman!" he protested. "And gorgeous!"

"So? She's as much of a nerd as you and I are, just law instead of physics or pre-med. And I've known that she's gorgeous since we were fourteen!"

"Are you setting us up?"

"No, but she's sweet, and if you're nice to her, I'll bet she says 'yes' if you ask her out. I've known her since we were five, so I have a pretty good idea of what she likes."

"You're sure?"

I smirked, "Just don't mention the *Playboy* magazines."

He laughed, "Yeah, that probably wouldn't be a good idea!"

I knew Jocelyn wouldn't care, but it was also not the first thing she should know about Gene.

"Then let's go. I have to go pick up my fiancée, but you can ride with Jocelyn, Clarissa, and Abby to the restaurant."

"Who all will be there?"

"Besides Elizaveta, Jocelyn, Abby, and me? Robby, Lee, Sophia, José, Dona, Lara, Jack, Brandon, and Kimiko."

"You're including me with your gang?"

"Yes, if you want to join us."

"Sure!"

"Then grab your coat and come down to my room. As I said, I'm going to get Elizaveta, but Clarissa is there waiting."

"Cool!"

I turned and left and went back to my room.

"Gene is going to join us," I said.

"The Freshman who just moved rooms?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes."

Jocelyn rolled her eyes, "Seriously?"

"Jos, cut him some slack, please. I'm not arranging an assignation! If you don't like him, you don't like him. If you do..."

"I'm going to kill you, Mik!" she growled.

"Shall I mention that threat to Elizaveta?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

Clarissa laughed, "Hell hath no fury like a «бабушка» (*babushka*) scorned?"

"Trust me," I grinned. "I fear for my life every time I talk to one! And both of you should, too!"

"Tasha is the truly frightening one," Jocelyn said soberly. "I can just see her with a scalpel and putting it to use, then keeping the gonads in a jar next to her bed!"

"She'd need a shelf," I chuckled.

"I wouldn't want to cross his pussy...cat," Clarissa teased.

"On that note, I'm going to get my betrothed. I'll see you guys at the restaurant."

I put on my jacket, hat, and gloves and left the room, passing Gene as he came to the door. I took the elevator down, walked to the lot, got into my car, and headed for Elizaveta's house. Twenty-five minutes later, we met everyone at the Chinese restaurant.

"Where are Sandy and Pete?" Sophia asked.

"They went to Cincinnati for the weekend with Jason and Fran," I replied. "Lara, where's Sarah tonight?"

"She and Al went to his parents' house for dinner."

"Sounds serious!" Clarissa said.

"It's his birthday tomorrow," Lara explained. "So it's not like 'come meet my parents' because the relationship is serious. They're just having fun."

"Aren't we all?" Robby asked. "That is what college is for!"

"Says the man who has a boyfriend AND a girlfriend!" Jocelyn teased.

During their ski trip, Robby and Sophia decided to become a couple, while Robby and Lee remained a couple. It was one of the weirder things I'd ever heard, but if they were happy, I wasn't going to interfere, and it certainly fits their history, as well as their feelings for each other. I hadn't said anything to Elizaveta, and I could see in her eyes that she was uncomfortable with the idea, but she didn't say anything.

"Can the guy who just got called up from the minors have a scorecard, please?" Gene asked.

Sophia gave me a quick glance, which told me that she'd seen the look on Elizaveta's face.

"We'll explain later," Sophia quickly said. "It's something which is better for a private conversation rather than here at the restaurant. OK?"

"Sure. Sorry."

"It's not a problem," she replied.

"Are we doing the 'group' menu deal?" José asked.

"That seems like the best option," Abby replied. "We get six large dishes, rice, a choice of soup, and ice cream at the end."

"That's the key!" Jocelyn said. "Ice cream!"

"You have to clean your plate before you get dessert, Jocelyn Theresa!" I said in my best 'dad' voice.

"Oh, shut up!" she exclaimed, but she was laughing. "How many times did you hear my dad say that?"

"Basically, every meal at your house from the time we were five!"

"He STILL says that!" she grouched. "Ugh!"

"Maybe if you hadn't asked for dessert first so often, he wouldn't!"

"Oh, shut up!" she replied, causing everyone to laugh.

"Mike, I assume you'd prefer a couple of vegetarian or shrimp dishes?" Abby asked.

"Yes, please."

"Any other requests?"

"Something spicy," José said.

"The Szechuan Beef with the dried peppers?"

"Perfect!"

The waitress came to the table just then.

"Green tea?" she asked.

"Three pots, please," Abby said.

"OK. I'll be back with the tea and to take your orders."

"What does the band we're going to see play?" Gene asked when the waitress walked away.

"Mostly 60s and 70s rock covers, but they have a few songs of their own," I replied. "Milena says they're pretty good."

"She's a professor, right?"

"A lecturer; she's working on her PhD. When she finishes it, she'll be a professor. Her mom is Doctor Blahnik in the music department."

"She's teaching a literature class, right?" he asked.

"Russian literature," I replied. "She decided the school needed a bit of proper culture!"

Everyone laughed.

"You're Russian, I take it?"

"Half," I replied. "But it's the dominant half."

"The REAL dominant half is sitting on his right!" Clarissa declared.

"And he better not forget it!" Elizaveta exclaimed with a huge smile.

"Are you really sixteen?" Gene asked.

"Fifteen. I won't be sixteen until April. We get married in May."

"Crazy," he replied, then quickly added, "Uhm, sorry."

"It's OK," I said in a friendly voice. "Quite a few people have that reaction. The situation is a bit strange, but it's basically due to the fact that the Orthodox Church doesn't allow deacons or priests to marry after ordination."

"But you can have married priests? I thought you guys were like the Roman Catholics, just not with the Pope."

"Not really," I replied. "There are big theological differences. With regard to clergy, most of our parish priests are married and have kids. That's the norm. Our bishops have to be celibate, and as I said, once a man is ordained a priest or deacon, he's not permitted to marry."

"Mike will be ordained a deacon in July after we come back from Europe," Elizaveta said. "So he needs to marry before then."

"This isn't a normal situation," I said. "Most deacons are ordained later in life, but our deacon passed away, and my bishop asked if I was willing to be ordained. I could have put it off, but I elected not to, and Elizaveta decided I was going to marry her."

Everyone laughed. The waitress brought our tea, and we stopped talking so Abby could place our main dish orders, and then everyone selected their own soup.

"Where are you from, Gene?" Sophia asked once the orders were placed.

"Sandusky," he replied. "It's on the lake, halfway between Toledo and Cleveland. How about all of you?"

"Lima for the three of us," Sophia said.

"West Monroe, which is about forty-five minutes west of here, for Jocelyn and me," I said. "Elizaveta is from McKinley, and so is Abby."

"Sylvania," Clarissa said.

"Columbus for me," Brandon said. "Kimiko is living in Columbus, but she's from Oguni, which is in Yamagata Prefecture, Japan."

"Just outside of Pittsburgh for me," Lara said. "Jack is from Youngstown."

"Milford, near Cincinnati," Dona said. "José is originally from Buenos Aires, but his family eventually moved to Cincinnati."

"How did you end up in a relatively small state school in Ohio, Lara?" Gene asked.

"My grandfather is from this area and graduated from Taft. I go to the same church Mike and Elizaveta do. Sophia is Greek, and she comes to church with us on feast days."

Our soup arrived and that limited the conversation as everyone ate, and just as we finished our soup, the main dishes arrived, accompanied by several large bowls of rice. Everyone helped themselves to one or more dishes, and we all began eating.

"So you all met here?" Gene asked.

"Except for Jos and me, and Sophia, Robby, and Lee, yes," I replied.

"Mike, are we going to do a concert this semester?" José asked.

"You mean one for the dorm or a public one?"

"Public. I figured we'd do our usual one or two in the dorm."

"You should," Robby quickly interjected. "It's your last chance before graduation."

"And before the ball and chain is attached!" Sophia teased.

"Somehow, I don't see being 'attached' to Elizaveta as a BAD thing in Mike's mind," José replied with a smirk, causing everyone to laugh and Elizaveta to blush.

When we finished the meal, Abby worked out each of our shares and I contributed for myself and Elizaveta. After we settled the bill, we left the restaurant and drove to the club where the band was playing. Fortunately, they allowed people under twenty-one, though they segregated the 'drinking' and 'non-drinking' areas. None of us was interested in drinking, so we all went to the 'underage' side. We could order food and soft drinks there, just not beer or liquor.

The band was pretty good and played a good mix of songs, including six of their own, which we all liked. They played three sets, and when they finished, we left and headed for Verner's for ice cream. When we finished our ice cream, I took Elizaveta home and wasn't surprised to find Jocelyn waiting for me at the dorm.

We went into my room, I closed the door partway and put on *Centerfield*, a new album by John Fogerty.

"The title track isn't first?" Jocelyn asked.

"No, it's actually on the 'B' side," I replied. "So, Gene?"

She laughed softly and shook her head, "A total nerd who reminds me of you and Dale in High School. But he seems like a nice guy."

"So you'll go out with him if he asks?"

"Sure; I need a babysitting gig!"

It was my turn to laugh, "He's only three years younger! It's not like he's six!"

"I know. It's fine, Mik. It's not like I'll be ready for a permanent relationship anytime soon."

"There's no need to rush into anything."

"You mean like you?"

"My circumstances are pretty unique, don't you think?"

"Obviously. But they aren't out of character for you. Of the girls I know who were potential mates, Elizaveta is really the only one who seems ready to take on the challenge despite only being fifteen. I'm curious about something."

"What?"

"Does that little girl know what's in store for her on her wedding night?"

"Clarissa is convinced that Elizaveta is going to be wound so tight by our wedding night that she's going to fuck me to death!"

"That blush at dinner says something different."

I shook my head, "Not really. She's just not used to teasing, especially not in public. And she's very conservative in public, similar to how Tasha was. You saw Tasha during that brief period between her eighteenth birthday and getting engaged to Nik -- she was WAY more risqué than I ever was before Sophomore year. And you were here when Kimiko and I were dating. She's even more conservative in public than Elizaveta or Tasha."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What changed?"

"What do you mean?"

"That you could just casually have sex."

"You DO remember how Dale and I behaved during High School, right?" I asked with a grin.

"Dale, I understood, but I thought you were different. And neither of you actually did anything."

"I was different; I am different. But there was a period where I just let my libido take control."

"With me?"

"You were, and are, special."

"So it wasn't just fucking?"

"Not with you," I said firmly. "Never. It couldn't be."

"I'm still amazed that you no longer flinch at that word."

"I've grown up, I guess."

"Do you remember what I told you when I planned to go to Purdue?"

"That I had to become a man you could marry, by which you meant I needed to grow up."

"Do you ever wonder what might have happened without the accident?"

"A lot when we were estranged, but not so much lately. I take it you do?"

"Not as much as I did before. And now you've gone down a path I could never have walked, not even for you."

"You do realize I could have said 'no' to the bishop, right?"

"Could you? Really? And how would you have felt if I basically kept you from being ordained?"

"I didn't seek to walk this path, Jos."

"No, but I know you well enough to know that you value obedience to your bishop over everything except becoming a doctor."

"Maybe," I replied. "If Elizaveta hadn't asserted herself, I might well still be looking, and the ordination would still be just the bishop's intent."

"Did you ever hear anything at all from Maggie?"

"No. I haven't even seen her around town, not that I go to too many places besides the Quick Mart, Doctor Blahnik's house, Verners's, and our usual restaurant hangouts. And Liz hasn't heard from her, either. The last I heard, she was dating Mike Palmer."

"That was so weird."

"I know, but you also know that Tasha was correct -- Elizaveta is the right girl for me. I just didn't like how things ended with Maggie."

"Which fits your personality, but I wouldn't try to reconcile."

"I don't intend to seek her out. If I run into her, I will apologize, but from the standpoint of asking her forgiveness, not trying to start a friendship."

"Good. See you in the morning?"

"Yes."

We hugged, and she left. I shut the door, said my prayers, brushed my teeth, undressed, and got into bed.



January 19, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Lee growled as we walked through the snow to the cafeteria for breakfast on Saturday morning.

"What?" I asked.

"The students there with the sign that says 'Exodus International'. It's a group which claims gays can be 'cured' through 'conversion therapy'."

"Isn't the guy standing with them the one who stood in front of the car?" Clarissa asked.

"It is," I replied.

"So the idiots are doubling down?" José asked.

"It sure looks that way," Robby agreed.

As we approached, one of the students came over and tried to hand a flyer to Robby and Lee, who both simply ignored the offered paper. I was half-tempted to take one just to see what kind of nonsense they were spouting, but the last thing I wanted to do was encourage them in any way. The man stepped forward to the center of the sidewalk so that we'd have to walk around him. As we did, he quoted 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God."

I was tempted to respond with a verse of my own but decided against it. We walked past the man, some to the left and some to the right, and went into the cafeteria.

"No response?" Melody asked me.

"It's not worth it," I replied. "Anything I say will fall on deaf ears. Is there any way to keep them off campus?"

"No. It's a public university, so the First Amendment is in full effect. Now, if they blocked the sidewalk completely or touched any of us, that would be a different story."

"That guy who moved into the sidewalk is the one who stood in front of my car a couple of weeks ago."

"You have WAY more patience than I do!"

We got in line, got our breakfast, and joined the rest of the gang at our usual table.

"Do you just want to ignore the idiots?" Melody asked.

"Nobody is going to change a bigot's mind," Clark said. "Those guys are as bad as racists!"

José snorted, shaking his head, "Or worse!"

"But ignoring them doesn't help!" Jeannette said.

"Talking to them is like talking to a brick wall," Robby said. "Think about what happened when Mike destroyed their pastor in a debate -- they fired him. They didn't change anything."

"That's not quite true," I said. "Two teens are coming to our church, and despite pressure, they're going to be chrismated on Holy Saturday. Their parents have left that church. So something did change."

"Not to get into it with you," Lee said, "but your church isn't exactly pro-gay."

"No, it's not," I replied. "But we do our best to love our neighbors. Nobody has treated you badly, nor will they."

"Until they see us kiss or hold hands."

"There will be some who take offense at that, yes."

"Robby, why are you getting on Mike's case?" Sophia asked. "He's been supportive from the beginning!"

"It's not Mike," Robby said, "it's religious people in general."

"Man, you sound like me first semester," Clark said. "I kept thinking the White Boy was like so many other ignorant white folks. He's not, but it took me some time to figure that out. And that was all on me, not on him."

"Sorry, Mike," Robby said.

"Don't sweat it," I replied. "Those idiots get to me, and I'm straight. Remember what I've said -- Jesus reserved his harshest words for the holier-than-thou types, who were, among other things, hypocrites. Those were his primary target for 'get the log out of your own eye'."

"I'd be VERY curious what sins those guys commit!" Lee said.

"While it's technically none of my business, it'll be the same ones everyone commits, of which 'pride' is one of the most insidious."

"Because they think they're better than all of us?" José asked.

"Exactly," I said. "We're ALL in the same condition -- mortal, with a sinful nature, and in need of salvation."

"How about we discuss something else?" Jeannette suggested. "We're playing right into their hands, and they even managed to cause a brief division! Let's just ignore them."

"If only it were that simple," Lee said, shaking his head.

We finished our breakfast and headed back to the dorm, once again passing the man and his small group. Nothing overt was said, but there were murmurs of 'Sodom and Gomorrah' which we ignored. I went to my room, put on Mozart, and pulled down *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I needed to finish by Monday morning for a quiz. Clarissa showed up with her copy of the same book about two minutes later, and we sat side-by-side reading. And while I was reading, I was also thinking.

"You know," I said about twenty minutes later, "Elder Zosima is based, at least in part, on Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk. Something he said, which I memorized years ago, totally fits what happened today. He said, '*Endeavor to know yourself and your own wickedness. Meditate on the greatness of God and your own sinfulness. Meditate on the suffering of Christ, the magnitude of Whose love and suffering surpass our understanding. Ascribe any good you do to God alone. Do not even think about the sin of a brother, but about what in him is better than in yourself.*'"

"That's how you live your life, isn't it?"

"I try. He also asked a very good question. This comes from a string of questions about how we behave, but it basically sums things up -- '*What is asceticism if your neighbor is not loved?*'"

"You mean fasting?"

"As an example, but it also applies to any self-discipline. He's asking how it can do you any good at all if you don't love your neighbor. Think about what Elder Zosima said just before he died -- that people must acknowledge their own sins and guilt and ask forgiveness if they are to be truly faithful."

"The opposite of what those clowns on the sidewalk are doing."

"And yet, when I called them idiots, I sinned against them."

"But they ARE idiots!" Clarissa protested.

"What's the old saying? Better to keep your mouth shut and let someone think you're an idiot rather than open it and prove them right? I think they're proving themselves to be idiots without me calling them names."

"You do realize that apologizing to them or asking their forgiveness will be seen as a victory by them."

I nodded, "Yes, that's true. But it's also the Christian thing to do."

"Don't, Mike!"

I smiled, "I'll confess the lack of love and see what Father Nicholas has to say. I suspect he'll advise me to simply avoid talking to them."

"This bit about corpses not decaying, do you believe that?"

I chuckled, "The Communists certainly do!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Lenin is kept on public view in his mausoleum, right?" I asked.

"Sure."

"Do you know WHY?" I asked with a goofy smile.

"I'm not quite putting two and two together here, but I suspect it has something to do with what the townspeople thought about Elder Zosima."

"That's exactly it! Lenin is, for all intents and purposes, a 'Saint', and as a 'Saint', his body **MUST** be incorrupt so as to show that the State is more powerful than God. Of course, those true saints who **ARE** incorrupt don't need embalming and refrigeration to stay incorrupt!"

"You seriously expect me to believe that the Communists adopted that from the church?"

"I do. There's more. Think about the 'May Day' parade -- Soviet flags lead the procession, followed by pictures of Lenin and, in the past, Stalin, followed by military equipment. The leaders stand on the Kremlin wall and observe and give their blessing. Does that ring any bells?"

"Your church services! Holy crap!"

"Exactly. For example, at Pascha, the procession around the church is led by a banner with the icon of the resurrection on it. Behind that are icons of Christ and Mary. After that come the cross, fans, censor, and other liturgical implements, followed by the priest. If there is a bishop, he stands and observes the procession. And 'May Day' and Pascha are both held around the same time."

"So the Communists basically adopted the cultural forms for themselves?"

"Yes. But the people, well, outside the major cities, never really gave up their faith. There's a story of a town in the Urals which decided it was going to have a Paschal service, and the KGB did everything they could to stop it -- arrested the priest, locked the church, set guards around the building, and so on. Everyone in the town gathered in the town square just after midnight, and the police and KGB were ready for a riot or an attempt by the crowd to force their way into the church. Instead, one man climbed onto a low wall and proclaimed, 'Christ is Risen!' and the assembled people roared back, 'Truly He is risen!'. They did that three times, then dispersed peacefully, leaving the KGB and police dumbfounded."

"That's like the story you told me about the Albanian woman."

"Exactly. I told that one to Doctor Mercer as well."

"I'll ask again, are they true?"

I shrugged, "Does it matter? Would the 'Parable of the Good Samaritan' have more impact if it were a description of actual events?"

"Probably not, but you're evading!"

"No, I'm Orthodox!" I grinned. "But seriously, this is like the debate about the Bible being the literal words of God. It's a silly argument, in the end, because it has no real bearing on anything important. Learn the truths taught there; don't focus on the minutiae. Think about Monday's quiz -- is Doctor Blahnik going to ask about specific details or specific words? Or is she going to ask about overarching themes?"

"But what do you think, Mike?"

"I think it's too easy to spend time worrying about things like that and not to focus on learning the lessons. You, for the most part, are very much a scientist, through and through. I am a scientist, but only in the areas where science can truly speak. Will I want definitive answers when diagnosing a patient? Yes, of course. Will I want detailed, accurate, and verifiable medical facts? Absolutely. But in my spiritual life, I not only don't need them, but they actually get in the way!"

"And where they conflict?" Clarissa asked.

"Where exactly?"

"Morals? Ethics?"

"Neither of which are fact-based! They are, in the end, opinions. And yes, someone could point to my faith and say the same thing. But trying to conflate 'facts' and 'truth' as being one and the same is a grave error. There are some truths which cannot be scientifically measured nor can they be rigorously analyzed."

"Such as?"

"I love you, Clarissa," I replied, looking directly into her eyes. "With all my heart."

She smiled, "Something which is undeniably true but which can't be proved by the scientific method. And which has no real basis in science, as your heart has no feelings or emotions."

"Exactly. Shall we continue reading?"

"Yes."

We read until lunch, though I took breaks to say my prayers, and after lunch, we both finished the novel, with me finishing about ten minutes before Clarissa. There was little time left before I had to head to the church for Vespers, so Clarissa left, I changed clothes, and headed for the church.

"Father, would you hear my confession before Vespers?" I asked.

He nodded, and we went to stand before the icon screen. He put his *epitrachil* over my shoulders and said the necessary prayers, then asked me what it was I needed to confess. I explained the encounter earlier in the day, my response, what I'd said, and then how I'd felt later about my interactions with them.

"It's an interesting problem," Father Nicholas said. "We're called to confess and ask for forgiveness in order to receive forgiveness from God, but in this case, asking forgiveness would actually encourage un-Christian behavior. Not the belief that engaging in homosexual acts is sinful, mind you, but in the way it's being expressed."

"That actually came up in the conversation at breakfast. My friend Robby pointed out that we agreed with those students."

"On the sinfulness of homosexual ACTS, yes, but not in our approach, which always has to be in love. And I don't mean what those students would say is 'love', which they feel gives them a license to condemn and judge."

"So where do I draw the line? How do I, as a clergyman, find the right balance?"

"That's one of the main struggles I have as a pastor -- how do I express love and ensure I have a chance to be heard without appearing to condone sin."

"I never once felt you were condoning my fornication."

"You weren't the problem there, Mike. What if your fornication had been made public? Then how does it look?"

"Cover-up," I said with a smirk. "You and Nixon."

"You jest, but there is some truth to that. My position would be untenable because no matter what you or I or the bishop said, people would feel I'd been covering for you and allowing your sin to continue unchecked."

"But it did continue," I replied.

"Until it didn't," Father Nicholas said. "There comes a point when you do have to draw a line in the sand, and we were quickly approaching the point where I would have had to tell His Grace you were not worthy of ordination, not because you were a sinner, but because you were uncontrolled. That said, there is now zero tolerance on this matter."

"Somehow, I think your tolerance is, effectively, meaningless because I don't think I'd be alive to make a confession."

Father Nicholas laughed, "Fear is a great motivator; fear of death is one of the greatest! But you understand my point."

"Yes, of course. So where is that line with my friends?"

"As I said, it's a difficult balance between loving them in a Christian way and condoning their sin. That's going to be something you're going to have to deal with for the rest of your life. I don't have any quick and easy answers because there are none. Well, that's not true -- there are none that conform to living your life in a proper Christian manner. You could go down the route of those students and the other members of their church and shun anyone who you felt was a sinner, but where does that lead?"

"If they were honest? To the shunning of everyone, including myself. It's as if they have this fiction that THEIR sins are small and meaningless, while the sins of others are grave and deadly."

"Which is the opposite of how the church tells us we're supposed to live our lives -- believing, rightly, that we are the chief sinner."

"We're reading *The Brothers Karamazov* for our literature class, and I had an interesting discussion with Clarissa about Elder Zosima. But it's hard to look at those students and see them as being better."

"And yet, that is what we are called to do. In fact, isn't that why you are here for confession? Because you didn't do that?"

"Being a Christian, I mean REALLY being a Christian, is difficult."

"Obviously. And nobody has nailed you to a cross, have they? Or fed you to lions? Or exiled or imprisoned you?"

"No," I chuckled. "But I wasn't complaining about suffering; I heard enough about that from my grandfather. I was simply remarking on the daily struggles. And my deeper understanding now of the bishop's instruction to make use of the wisdom and spiritual riches of the church. I did, to a point, but everything that has happened in the last few months has really driven it home."

"The journey and the struggle don't end until we stand before the 'dread judgment seat'."

"I'll make sure I bring my onions," I replied.

"Please tell me you do not follow the teachings of Seraphim Rose on 'aerial toll houses'!"

"I did read *The Soul After Death*, but it strikes me as almost gnostic; I can see using the concept of 'toll houses' as a metaphor for self-examination and confession, but to say that we literally go through twenty different interrogations by demons who decide if our soul should be taken to Hell does not conform to Christian teaching. In a sense, it's like the list of things to consider before confession, but the checklist is only that -- a list to check. True confession, as with true judgment, is seen in our souls by God alone."

"Thank heavens," Father Nicholas said. "I assume you know the controversy that has caused in ROCOR."

"Yes, I recall Father Herman talking about the synod where the ROCOR bishops basically told Deacon Lev Pulaho to stop talking about the issue because his refutation of Seraphim Rose was causing an uproar amongst certain segments of the faithful. To me, it identifies the stark difference between monastics and non-monastics in their approach to spirituality."

"You know, I never asked, but do you have a copy of the *Philokalia*?"

I nodded, "Yes, of course. But I understand that its purpose is for the instruction of monks, and I am no monk!"

"No kidding," Father Nicholas said dryly.

"As I was going to say," I replied with a soft smile, "...that said, the prayer rule you gave me drove home the whole point of *hesychasm*. I sort of understood it intellectually, but after a solid week of contemplative prayer, quietness, and constant recitation of the 'Jesus Prayer', I have a much better insight into how it affects the soul and body."

"You're not called to be a monk, Subdeacon, but that doesn't mean that spiritual wisdom is not for you. In fact, I'd say it is exactly for you, even though you'll have a public ministry in both your secular and spiritual lives, as well as a faithful wife with whom you'll share your ministries."

"And this morning, rather than focus on the 'Jesus Prayer', I let those students get under my skin."

"Yes, you did. And I want you to continue with the prayer rule. I think we'll probably incorporate it into your family prayer rule once you're married. There is much to be gained from praying together."

"Something I learned from praying with Angie."

"A hard lesson, given how things turned out. I'm sorry, but we're going to be late starting Vespers if we don't finish. Is there anything else on your heart?"

"Not at the moment, but I'm sure there will be. It's the human condition."

"It is."

Father Nicholas moved his *epitrachil* over my head, said the prayers of absolution, and made the sign of the cross. He removed the *epitrachil* from my head, I kissed one of the crosses embroidered on it, and we went into the altar to begin the Vespers service.

XLVII. "It's just so unfair."

January 24, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

The phone rang on Thursday evening while we were studying, and I went to my room to answer it.

"Hi, Mike. It's Fran Mercer."

"Hi, Doctor Mercer."

"I had a session with Angie today and explained to her about why the State wouldn't let her marry. It didn't go well."

"What happened?" I asked apprehensively.

"She became very angry and agitated. Her psychiatrist ordered a mild sedative, but Angie is refusing to take it."

"Lord have mercy," I replied softly. "So now what?"

"She's not doing anything destructive or threatening to harm anyone, so her mom took her home. She has a follow-up appointment with the psychiatrist tomorrow, but I suspect she's going to resist."

"Do you think it would help if I asked her to go?"

"I think right now it's best if you stay a bit aloof. She's blaming me, her psychiatrist, and the State of Ohio. I'd much rather have her upset with us than with you or her mom."

"Is she having a meltdown?" I asked.

"No, this is just pure anger and frustration. But it could very well lead to a schizophrenic episode."

"Lovely. Did you call Father Stephen?"

"Yes, just after I saw Angie this morning. He was the second call after I spoke to Angie's psychiatrist. Father Stephen is going to try to see her tomorrow, but if he can't, or she won't see him, he'll try to speak with her at church, if she goes."

"I have a strong suspicion she'll go," I replied. "But I suspect she's going to start 'splitting', and she'll try to force him to take sides, which is why you told me to stay aloof, isn't it?"

"Did you read your entire Abnormal Psych text in one sitting? Or was it two?"

"I skimmed and read the important parts. Angie is going to divide the world into good and bad in a black-and-white manner. It's a function of depression, in addition to 'borderline personality disorder'. Is it possible she was misdiagnosed?"

"I take it you didn't read the section on borderline personality disorder in depth?"

"Correct."

"If your textbook is thorough, it will point out that patients with borderline personality disorder often exhibit signs of other disorders at some point in their lives. We haven't seen any indication of Angie having borderline personality disorder. She is not impulsive..."

"Her drive to see me in McKinley?" I asked, interrupting.

"That was planned, not impulsive. She quit taking her medication so she could drive."

"OK. Sorry to have interrupted."

"It's OK. She's not impulsive, nor does she engage in self-harm, and her relationships were neither unstable nor chaotic. So, as of now, I'd say our diagnosis is correct. But that's as of right now; that could change at any point."

"Wonderful," I sighed. "What do I do if she contacts me? Or comes to see me?"

"I'm hoping that doesn't happen, at least in the near term, but if she does, simply encourage her to listen to her doctors, take her medication, and follow her treatment plan. Tell her that your medical training requires that you support her doctors' diagnosis and treatment plan because you aren't qualified to make that kind of diagnosis. It's not technically true until you're actually in medical school, but it's true enough for our purposes."

"I can compare it to not interfering with spiritual guidance which comes from a priest or bishop," I replied. "It's more or less of the same character, just spiritual health instead of physical or mental health. But what happens when she asks if I'm willing to marry her? It's not like I can hide the fact that Elizaveta and I are getting married on May 26th."

"If she does contact you, and she raises the issue, blame me. She's already upset with me, and please don't take this the wrong way, but we need to preserve her affection for you for the future. She can get new counselors and new psychiatrists, but she can't get new family or close friends."

"That sounds so cynical," I replied. "Or maybe like a cheap parlor trick."

"Remember what we just discussed about splitting -- we need to keep you and Angie's mom on the good side of the ledger; Father Stephen as well, if possible. One sure way to push her into a schizophrenic episode is if she thinks there are NO good people."

"What about her friend Anna?"

"She has a job lined up in Chicago with Allstate and will be moving there in June. She's also not really comfortable with Angie's illness."

"Which is a common reaction, according to my textbook."

"It is, even for family. Mental illness is poorly understood, and many, many people are unable to deal with friends or family who suffer from mental illness. You seem to be able to, and that's why I want to preserve some kind of good relationship between you and Angie, if possible."

"Do you think she'll call?"

"As I said, her mom will do her best to prevent that."

"Which isn't what I asked."

"If she still thinks of you as an ally, then I think she'll try, yes. And I do think she sees you as an ally."

"How do you do this?" I asked.

"It's not easy, but you'll face the same kind of challenges in the ER. There will be days when you wonder why you chose to be a doctor. There will be many other

days when you see a smile on the face of a loved one when you tell them you saved their husband or wife, their dad or mom, their brother or sister, or their son or daughter. That's how you do it."

"I think we're going to be having quite a few conversations in the future."

"I'll be here. See you next month?"

"The 9th would be best; it's before Great Lent starts."

"That works. I'll see you then."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then went back to the study group. When we finished, Clarissa followed me to my room.

"Does Elizaveta have anything planned for your birthday?" she asked.

"We're going out to dinner after Vespers. Why?"

"The gang wants to have a party for you at Doctor Blahnik's house on Friday."

"OK, but no gifts, please."

"I'll tell them that's your wish. May I get you something?"

"Yes, but please give it to me in private."

"OK. Will you eat cake, even if it's made with eggs?"

"Yes, of course. Were you planning dinner?"

"No. I figured we'd triple date with Jocelyn and Gene and start the party at 8:00pm."

"Sounds good. Chinese?"

"That is the best when you're fasting. Lent starts soon, right?"

I nodded, "Officially on the 25th, but 'Meatfare' is on the 17th. The Paschal cycle actually starts on the 3rd, with the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, and fasting that week is canonically forbidden."

"I'm starting to remember from last year. Maybe I should get one of those calendars."

"There are plenty on the table in the narthex. I'll bring you one."

"Thanks, but I think I'll come to church with you on Sunday, if that's OK."

"Always."

"Then I'll leave you to your prayers."

"Thanks."

She left and I said my prayers, performed my usual bedtime routine, then climbed into bed.



February 1, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"This is WAY too much!" I protested.

"You're supposed to say 'thank you', Mike!" Clarissa replied. "This is from Jocelyn, Abby, and me. And it makes sense."

"It does; but the cost!"

"Is none of your business! And, yes, I checked to make sure your stereo had a free set of RCA inputs."

The three women had bought me a Compact Disc player and three discs -- *52nd Street* by Billy Joel, *Purple Rain* by Prince, and *Born to Run* by Bruce Springsteen. I had all three of those on LPs, but I knew that releases on the new discs were still somewhat limited, so it made sense. It would also give me a chance to compare the sound, which people said was awesome but which I'd never heard.

"Thank you," I said.

"Look at it this way, Mike," Jocelyn said. "You can buy music either on LP or disc now. Rumor has it that discs will take over the world."

I chuckled, "We'll see. The cassette didn't kill albums, though I hear discs are supposed to have much higher fidelity."

"And your tape deck won't eat them!"

During our Senior year, the cassette player in my Mustang had eaten one of Jocelyn's homemade tapes. Fortunately, it was just a defect in the tape and not a problem with the cassette player, and Nate had been able to remove the tape for us without damaging the player.

"I need to go get Elizaveta," I announced. "See you at the Chinese restaurant?"

"Yes."

Just over thirty minutes later, Elizaveta and I walked into the Chinese restaurant where Clarissa, Abby, Jocelyn, and Gene were waiting and joined them at the table. We had a nice dinner, with the other two couples treating, and then headed to Doctor Blahnik's for the party. When we arrived, I was happy to see that my wishes for no gifts had been honored and that the entire gang, along with Joel and Milena and, of course, Doctor Blahnik and Derek, were at the house.

Doctor Blahnik had what I would have called European sensibilities about drinking, so there was wine and beer available despite many of the guests being under twenty-one, but most of our gang didn't drink much, if at all. With most of us planning post-graduate work, we were far too focused on grades to even think about getting drunk. I was mostly sticking to my 'only on special occasions' rule, though I did accept wine when Doctor Blahnik offered it -- just not in the way she most wanted! I quickly pushed THAT thought out of my mind before it got me into trouble.

That worked, at least until Doctor Blahnik asked me to dance with her. It was something I wouldn't be able to do after ordination, but now, with Elizaveta's blessing, I could. Doctor Blahnik was careful not to dance TOO close, but in some ways, that made it worse, as her breasts occasionally rubbed gently across my chest. I struggled mightily to prevent a reaction, and managed, just, not to make it very obvious how enticing she was. When the song ended, I sought safety of a sort by asking Lara to dance with me.

"Did you?" she asked in Russian, and with a smirk.

"It would be against University rules and could get her fired," I replied but in English.

"Not an answer!" she laughed, switching to English.

"You know me better than that," I said.

"That you won't say if you did or that you didn't do it?"

"Troublemaker!"

"Always! Elizaveta won't get upset if I give you a birthday kiss on the cheek, will she?"

"She's Russian enough to understand," I replied. "And you're Russian, so she won't read anything into it."

When the song finished, Lara did give me a kiss on each cheek, and I went back to where Elizaveta was waiting. I put my arm around her waist, and she slipped hers around mine, then leaned her head against my shoulder. We stood together for a bit until Milena and Joel carried a large sheet cake into the room, adorned with twenty-two candles, and everyone sang *Happy Birthday*.

"«С днём рождения» (*S dnom rozhdeniya*) !" Lara and Elizaveta proclaimed in unison when they finished. ("Happy Birthday")

"Thank you all!" I replied, then blew out the candles with one long breath.

"Many years, husband!" Elizaveta said softly, then kissed my cheek.

"Mom and I have a special song we'd like to sing for you," Milena announced.

"Have you heard of the cartoon «Чебурашка» (*Cheburashka*)?" ("Topple")

"No," I replied.

"It's from the early 70s, and this is *Gena the Crocodile's Song*. The premise is that it's his birthday, and he's alone, so he sings himself this song."

Milena and her mom sang the song in nearly perfect Russian, and when they finished, everyone applauded.

[See the following link for the music and a possible translation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-0xugvRnUg>

and the following for an alternate translation (which I feel is better):

<https://www.letspolka.com/2009/06/crocodile-genas-birthday-song/>]

"Translation?" Jocelyn asked. "I don't speak 'Sputnik!'"

Everyone laughed and Doctor Blahnik gave a rough translation of the song, and then Joel cut the cake. Derek brought a few bottles of champagne into the room, and once everyone had a glass and a piece of cake, Clarissa gave a toast.

"To my best friend in the world, happy birthday and many years!"

"Happy birthday, Mike!" everyone proclaimed with raised glasses.

When we'd eaten our cake and drunk our champagne, the music was turned up, and there was dancing and socializing until it was time for me to take Elizaveta home.

"Where are we going tomorrow night?" she asked as I pulled into the driveway at her house.

"A Japanese restaurant near Columbus," I said. "It's one of my favorite places, but it's a bit expensive, so I don't go too often."

"And our dates?"

"I budgeted for entertainment when I worked out my plan for college and medical school. Your dad isn't going to charge us rent, so our finances will be fine. I've also applied for several scholarships and grants, and if my success with them for my undergraduate degree is any indication, I should get some. And my parents will contribute towards my tuition for four more years."

"Are they helping your sister?"

"She and Paul chose not to take the money my mom offered, and I see their point. On the plus side, my dad is at least continuing to be semi-cordial to Paul, even if they'll likely never really be friends. But it's still touch-and-go."

"I'm glad you and my dad get along."

"Me, too!"

We got out of the car, I walked her to the door, we exchanged a soft kiss, and after she went inside, I got into my car and drove back to campus.



February 2, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Hi, Mike!" Tracy said as I came into the dorm lobby after my morning run in the gym.

"Hi, Tracy."

"I hear it's your birthday."

"It is."

"Wanna celebrate?" she asked with a sultry look.

I shook my head and held up my hand, "I promised not to."

"I won't tell if you don't!"

"It doesn't work that way," I replied. "If you'll excuse me, I need a shower."

"Need some help?"

"Not since I was little," I said and then walked towards the elevators.

I took the elevator upstairs, showered, trimmed my beard, dressed, then met the gang for breakfast. After breakfast, the usual 'inner circle' gathered in my room -- Clarissa, Lara, Jocelyn, Robby, Lee, Sophia, Sandy, Pete, Kimiko, Brandon, José, Dona, and, because he and Jocelyn had hit it off, Gene.

"Doing anything special to celebrate your birthday?" Sandy asked.

"Well, when I came back from my run, Tracy Vaughn made a futile attempt to cover another spot on her Rickenbacker 8 Bingo card."

"That's a heck of a challenge, considering a couple of gay guys live on this floor!" Jocelyn declared.

"You do realize that the equipment will usually work with proper stimulation even without sexual attraction, right?" Lee asked.

"You know, I never thought about it," Jocelyn replied. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize; you're straight, so why would you even think about it?"

"Mike, I have to ask," Pete said, "what is it about you that has women throwing themselves at you?"

"Tracy throws herself at EVERY guy!" Sandy laughed. "You had to tell her 'no!'"

"Or so you assume!" he teased.

"I know you better than that!"

"How did I miss this?" Gene asked.

"I don't think she's worked her way down to Freshmen just yet!" Dona said, laughing. "Did you know she lives only a few miles from me back home, but we never knew each other? I knew her older sister, though. She's studying to be a nurse in Cincinnati. Supposedly, Tracy graduated a year early."

The phone rang, and I got up to answer it.

"Subdeacon? It's Father Stephen."

"Father, bless!"

"The Lord bless you, Subdeacon. I'm calling about Angie."

"Did something happen?" I asked apprehensively.

"She's at Clermont County Hospital because she had a breakdown late last night. I'm at the hospital, and Doctor Mercer asked me to call you while she's with Angie. They sedated Angie last night, and they'll need to restart the drugs this morning. I wrote down what Doctor Mercer said: first, they're going to try

Haldol, and if that doesn't work, then they'll try one of the atypical antipsychotics. She said she'll call you when she has a chance."

"Thanks, Father."

"Pray for Angie, Mike."

"I will. Thanks for calling me."

"You're welcome."

We said 'goodbye' and hung up.

"Angie?" Clarissa asked.

"That was her pastor. She had a breakdown last night, and she's in the hospital."

"Oh, Mike, I'm sorry."

There were murmurs of agreement from all the others.

"I pretty much expected something like this," I sighed, sitting back down between Jocelyn and Clarissa.

"Are you OK, Mik?" Jocelyn asked.

"Yeah, I suppose. But however I feel, it's not nearly as bad as it is for Angie. I'm afraid she'll lose her job and have to drop out of school. And if that happens, they'll likely have to up the dose of her anti-depressants, which is what will turn her into a zombie, in addition to the side effects of the antipsychotics, which can be pretty bad."

"There's no cure?" Gene asked.

I shook my head, "Not that anyone knows of. At best, it can be managed. And that's in maybe twenty percent of cases."

"What can we do for you, Mike?" Kimiko asked.

I shook my head again, "Nothing, really. Well, be my friends, which you're already doing."

"Sorry, but what am I missing?" Gene asked.

"You came late to the party," Clarissa said. "Mike and Angie were a very serious couple. And before Mike objects, I know Angie always had problems, but she was doing her best to actually BE 'Mrs. Loucks', which is the name the dorm had for her. She converted to Orthodoxy so she could be even closer to Mike. She had a couple of breakdowns, and he stuck by her, but ultimately, it had to end because of her condition."

"Oh, wow! I didn't realize."

"That's the second time something like that happened to Mike," Jocelyn said, then quickly added, "I'll explain later, Gene."

We were interrupted by the phone, and I jumped up to answer it, thinking it was Doctor Mercer.

"Happy birthday, Mikey!" Liz gushed.

"Thanks, Liz. I got your card."

"Cool. Doing anything special?"

"The gang threw a party for me last night, and tonight, I'm taking Elizaveta to dinner."

"You sound kind of down for your birthday."

"Angie went into the hospital last night. She had another episode."

"Oh, shit, Mikey. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. Lunch next Saturday?"

"Sure! Usual time and place?"

"Yes."

"See you then!"

We said 'goodbye', I hung up and went to sit down. I'd just made it when the phone rang again. This time, it was my grandparents, followed about ten minutes later by my parents. I made a point to sound upbeat so as not to worry any of them, but I certainly wasn't in a 'happy birthday' mood. I knew I had to change that before I saw Elizaveta because the last thing I wanted her to do was feel bad because I was feeling bad.

We hung out until lunchtime, and after lunch, Clarissa, Jocelyn, and I went for a walk.

"Are you going to be OK?" Clarissa asked.

"I think so," I replied. "If not, I need to at least fake it a bit with Elizaveta so that I don't ruin her night out. I just get the feeling I'll have more days like this one once we become doctors, if not worse."

"I don't even want to think about losing a patient," Clarissa said. "I mean, what can really prepare you for that?"

"Not much, I'd guess," I replied.

"The worst thing that could happen to me as a civil litigator is I lose a case," Jocelyn said. "I can't imagine what it would be like to have someone I was caring for die. Or something like what happened to Angie."

"Or have a friend who was suicidal," I replied softly.

"That's not fair, Mike," Clarissa declared.

"Actually, it is," Jocelyn replied. "One thing I've learned in counseling is just how much a suicide attempt hurts the people you love. I was trying to hurt Mike, and I succeeded."

"Not nearly as much as if you actually *had* succeeded," I replied.

"No, but it destroyed 'Jos and Mik' and left us estranged for a long time."

"Ancient history," I replied. "Sorry for bringing it up."

"No, it's actually relevant," she replied. "You've had to struggle with so many emotional challenges over the past four years."

"And I thank God that I met Doctor Mercer when Liz was having her problems. She's far more helpful than Doctor Hart. Not that he was totally bad, but his advice wasn't always a good fit for me. Doctor Mercer's is."

"You don't always take her advice," Clarissa said.

I chuckled, "Nor did you!"

"I take it she told you two not to try?" Jocelyn asked.

"She was convinced it was a disaster in the making," I said. "She was mistaken because of how close Clarissa and I were. We were so in tune that we could try and then make a decision about the future."

"And it was close," Clarissa said. "Very close. But I need a female partner, and no three-way relationship would ever work given Mike's involvement in his church."

"Three-way relationship?" Jocelyn asked. "You mean both of you or just you?"

"Either way," Clarissa smirked. "But you know the issues that would cause for Mike, even if we could find the right girl."

"You actually TALKED about this?" Jocelyn asked, sounding incredulous.

"We talked about every option," I replied. "In detail."

"And ordination?" Jocelyn asked.

"Would have required a very long conversation," Clarissa replied. "I'm not sure I could have handled it, but I would have considered it, just as you would have."

"Neither of us could walk that path with him the way Elizaveta will, but we can be there to help care for him."

"Absolutely."

"I love you both very, very much," I said.

"And we love you, too, Mike," Jocelyn said.

"Absolutely," Clarissa agreed.

We returned to the dorm, and I turned on the electric kettle to make tea. The three of us spent the afternoon together until it was time for me to leave for church. Clarissa and Jocelyn left the room, I changed and then headed to church.

When I arrived, I let Father Nicholas know what had happened with Angie, and after Vespers, as I'd predicted, he asked the congregation to sing *Many Years* to me. After receiving birthday greetings, Elizaveta and I left for the Japanese restaurant.

"Father Stephen called me this morning to let me know Angie is in the hospital," I said as I pulled out of the church parking lot.

"Do you need to go see her?"

I shook my head, "She's sedated, and they'll have her on strong doses of antipsychotic medication. I haven't spoken to Doctor Mercer yet. I am going to see her next Saturday."

"Because of Angie?"

"No, this one is for me. It's about dealing with the stress that will start in earnest in August. You're welcome to come along, if you want."

"Would that cause you to be less open with her?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Though it would limit what she could say about Angie unless you were in the waiting room for that part of the conversation."

"I'll go with you, if you want."

"This is a team effort, so it's probably not a bad idea. But I should have asked Doctor Mercer before I invited you. Let me check with her, though I'm sure she'll say 'yes'."

"I have your present at the house. I assumed I could give it to you when you take me home."

"That's fine."

"And you'll accept me putting a bow on my nose?"

"If you also put a ribbon around your neck, but wear absolutely nothing else!"

Elizaveta laughed softly, and I was sure she blushed, though in the darkened car, I couldn't see for sure.

"You are bad, husband!" she exclaimed mirthfully.

"It's only four months away!" I replied.

"One hundred and fourteen days!" Elizaveta declared. "Not that I'm counting!"

"That's..." I did some quick math in my head, "roughly 9,849,600 seconds. Well, a bit less because our wedding is in the afternoon, and it's evening now."

"Whoa! You just did that in your head?"

"I did. Math has always been easy for me. I memorized my times tables up to twenty-five, for example."

"We only had to learn up to twelve."

"Same here, but I chose to learn the rest."

"Seventeen times twenty-three?"

"391," I replied quickly.

"Twenty-one squared?"

"441."

"One plus one?"

I chuckled, "Two to start with, but if the addition works correctly, it becomes multiplication, and it could be five or six, or perhaps even seven!"

"You'd be OK with five kids?"

"I don't have to be pregnant or go through labor and delivery! It's up to you, though I'd prefer at least two."

"Yes, of course. But I think we have lots of time to decide."

"And at least two years of practice!" I replied.

"Speaking of babies, I made my appointment with my OB/GYN for April 2nd, after school."

"You know, I didn't even think about this, but are you regular?"

"You mean my monthly? Yes. Like clockwork since I turned fourteen. Before that it was totally irregular, but my doctor says that's normal. And yes, our honeymoon will be fine! And there will be enough time to take the pills for a whole month before then."

"Good."

"Dad says he and Mom will sign the forms the first week in May so we can get our marriage license."

"Cool. I take it everything is OK on the planning front?"

"My grandmothers haven't said there are any problems, and I try to stay out of the way! But the invitations will go out this week."

"Good."

"I did remind my brothers that we aren't doing ANY of those silly Russian traditions! No kidnapping the bride, no stealing my shoes, nothing."

"Good."

"I also made sure that my grandfathers, dad, and Gennady and Iosif, know that we're not going to drink a lot. Just three traditional toasts with vodka. And I reminded them that you'll only sip yours."

"Is Iosif coming for the wedding?"

"He and Dad had a long discussion about it, and he will, even though it's a long flight."

"That's good. Did your brother set a date for his wedding?"

"October 20th, but they haven't confirmed just yet. Dad will make all the arrangements for us to fly out and back so we don't miss school. It'll be a long weekend."

"Which church?"

"St. Nicholas in Salem. That's north of Boston."

"And home of the witch trials!"

"If you make a comment about me in that regard..." she said menacingly.

"You would be a good witch, of course!" I teased.

Elizaveta laughed and softly smacked my arm but then put her hand over mine on the stick shift, and we rode with just the radio and the hum of the tires interrupting the silence. We had a wonderful meal, then returned to Elizaveta's house so she could give me my present, though it wasn't as we'd joked. Instead, it was a pair of black dress shirts, which would come in very handy in the future. We exchanged several soft kisses before I left to head back to campus.



February 5, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday, when I returned from the chemistry lab, there was a message from Doctor Mercer asking me to call her back after lunch. It was time for lunch, so we went to the cafeteria and ate. As soon as we finished, I returned to the dorm and called Doctor Mercer's office. I was put through right away.

"How is she?" I asked without any preliminaries.

"Calm, but that's because of the sedatives."

"What set her off?" I asked.

"She refused her medication and became very agitated. When her mom couldn't settle Angie down and get her to take her pills, she called me. I tried to speak to Angie, but that only made her even more agitated, and she began crying and screaming. That's when I advised her mom to take her to the ER and called Angie's psychiatrist to meet us at the hospital."

"May I ask what she said?"

"That she wasn't crazy and that she had the right to marry you if she wanted to."

"Wonderful," I sighed.

"Mike, it's not your fault."

"Sorry, that wasn't me blaming myself; that was me being sad for Angie. And I'm frustrated."

"We'll discuss this more on Saturday, but you're not going to be able to save every patient."

"I understand that; I just want to save THIS one!"

"I'm afraid there's little we can do except treat her and hope for the best. You know there's no cure."

"I know," I said, my eyes tearing up. "It's just so unfair."

"Yes, it is. Are you OK?"

"OK enough," I replied. "Clarissa and Jocelyn are here, and I'm having dinner with my future father-in-law today."

"Call me anytime, day or night, if you need me."

"Thanks, Doctor Mercer. See you Saturday. Oh, before I forget, Elizaveta is going to accompany me. If we're going to be a team, she probably needs to understand how I deal with stress."

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "You mean after the honeymoon wears off?"

I chuckled, "That kind of stress relief will NEVER stop, but you know it's only effective to a point."

"That's not the question! The question is whether or not YOU know it."

"We'll be there on Saturday."

Doctor Mercer laughed, and we said 'goodbye'. The bit of teasing had made me feel just a tiny bit better, but not a lot. I went to find Clarissa and Jocelyn but only found Clarissa. She came back to my room, and we sat together while we read *The Cherry Orchard*, the last play written by Anton Chekhov before his death.

"You should enjoy *Lolita*," Clarissa smirked when we put our bookmarks in our books just before 5:00pm.

"She's like thirteen, and I do NOT have that fantasy. If you recall, I had to set aside my objections to dating High School girls, and I didn't try to seduce Elizaveta or let her seduce me."

"Touchy, touchy!" Clarissa teased.

"Get out of here! I need to change."

We hugged, Clarissa left, I changed my clothes, then headed to the Country Club for dinner with Viktor Kozlov.

"When does golf season start?" I asked after the waiter had taken our orders.

"Usually, there are days we can go out starting in April. Are you missing it?"

"I don't have the bug, if that's what you mean," I said with a sly grin. "I'm just curious."

"Yet," he said with a smile. "You don't have the bug 'yet!'"

"We'll see!"

"How are things going?" he asked.

"Other than my friend being in the hospital, things are pretty good."

"The young woman with the psychological problems who used to attend services?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do?"

"Not unless you can conjure up a cure," I sighed.

"I'm really sorry, Mike."

"Thanks. It's not your fault; it's just depressing that nothing can really be done to fix this."

"Are you seeing someone?"

"Yes. And I have Elizaveta to help me, too. That's where we're going Saturday -- to see a therapist in Milford who I've been working with for a few years."

"May I ask?"

"My sister had some serious troubles, as did my friend Jocelyn, and I needed help dealing with those things."

"There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"Other than being a college-age male?" I asked with a grin. "No."

Viktor laughed, "In my day, it was liquor, football, and young women."

"You know I'm not much of a drinker and prefer hockey and baseball to football. As for young women, I believe the saying 'discretion is the better part of valor' applies."

"On that, I would agree. On another note, I understand from my mother and mother-in-law that everything is proceeding according to plan."

"THEIR plan," I chuckled. "Elizaveta and I are basically staying out of it, as we discussed. But she and I agree none of the usual hijinks. She's going to talk to her brothers."

"And I will as well. Most of the people at church wouldn't consider it, but brothers are different."

"My sister would agree completely!"

Viktor laughed and nodded.

"Changing subjects," he said, "I understand you applied for a scholarship and several grants?"

"Yes. That's how I managed to get through my undergrad degree with no debt."

"Just bring me your tuition bill for the Fall when you receive it, and I'll pay it. Allow the scholarships and grants to go to other students who need them. And before you object, borrowing money at current interest rates is not a financially sound idea, even with guaranteed student loans. One other thing -- if you have no debt, it'll make it much easier for you to move to a place of your own when you graduate, something I'm sure is important to you."

What he was saying made perfect sense, and when I thought about it, did it really matter if the money came from strangers or from my future father-in-law? And he was certainly right about my desire for Elizaveta and me to have a place of our own as soon as reasonably possible. It wasn't that I disliked Elizaveta's parents, but we needed to be family on our own terms, something which would be difficult with her grandmothers and her mom constantly around.

"OK," I replied. "Thank you."

"I see the look in your eyes, Mike. Remember, money is simply a means to an end, and this will allow you to focus on your education and your family. And in the end, your success in school is what will make you a doctor, not who pays the bills."

"That look was me deciding what you just described was the right course of action. That if I was willing to accept money from strangers, I should be willing to accept it from my father-in-law."

"Thank you. Did you get the minutes from the Campus Ministry Committee?"

"Yes, they were in my box in the church office on Saturday. I very much like the idea of doing a Vespers service on campus on Tuesday or Thursday evenings. I think that's better than a Bible study. And I can get Doctor Blahnik to act as a sponsor, which will make things much easier when it comes to reserving a room. The only problem I can see is who will fill in for Father Nicholas if he's not available."

"We don't have a solution for that problem at the moment because we know you aren't able to make any commitments like that until after you graduate, and probably not until after your first year of Residency. But we'll work it out."

Our food arrived, I prayed, and we began eating. The conversation was light, mostly about school for me and work for him, and when we finished, I thanked him for dinner and headed back to campus to join the study group.

There wasn't much regular homework, but we had a lab report to write up from the experiments we'd done that morning. That consumed most of our study period, but it also meant we'd have all day Thursday completely free.

"Want some company?" Jocelyn asked when she saw us get up from the table.

"Sure."

The two of us went to my room, and as had become my habit, I closed the door only partway, which afforded some privacy but not too much.

"What's up?" I asked.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?" I asked, a bit confused.

"That Gene and I would hit it off?"

"Who knows you better than anyone on this planet?" I asked with a grin.

Jocelyn laughed, "Dumb question, I guess."

"That good?"

"An interesting spark that I never really felt with Carl or Bill, even though Bill and I had sex."

"That's good. I assume you're going to take it slow?"

"He's never had a serious girlfriend before, so yeah."

"Jocelyn Mills, corrupter of innocent youth! Starting with me!"

"Right, because you didn't want to make love to me from the time we were fourteen!"

"Well, there is that!" I chuckled. "I'm happy for you, Jos."

"Thanks. One day at a time, though."

"That's all we can ever do," I agreed.

XLVIII. The Orthodox Way

February 9, 1985, Milford, Ohio

"Do you mind sitting in the waiting room for five minutes while I talk to Doctor Mercer about Angie?"

"That's fine," Elizaveta replied as we walked through the door of the building where Doctor Mercer had her office.

We went upstairs and into the waiting room, and Doctor Mercer greeted us. Elizaveta sat on the couch, and Doctor Mercer and I went into her office.

"Elizaveta will join us after we talk about Angie," I said.

"You don't need any private time?"

"I think the best course of action for my relationship is complete openness. My main counselor has to be my wife, and she has to be totally involved in my life. If I keep things from her, it's going to wreck our relationship."

"That's quite the change in attitude."

"The minor crisis over my sexual history made it pretty clear that keeping things from her would only lead to worse problems in the future. Since then, I've been sharing pretty much everything with her."

"Pretty much?"

"The one thing that has to stay hidden is the true nature of my relationship with Clarissa- not just for my sake but for Clarissa's sake."

"How many people know about that?"

"Besides Clarissa, you, and me? Two. And Clarissa confided in them. But they won't say anything. I know this goes against what I just said, but it has to stay private. And honestly, I haven't named any names for Elizaveta. She knows about Tasha because she and Tasha have spoken, and she suspects Jocelyn, but that's it."

"You do realize that if it ever comes out, it's going to blow apart your relationships, right?"

"I understand, but in this one instance, I'm between a rock and a hard place. The only way out of this is to never have done it in the first place, but there's no way to go back and undo it. And even if I could, I wouldn't because Clarissa and I simply HAD to know. But that isn't why I asked for some time alone; how is Angie?"

"As of last night, she seems stable on her current medication levels. If she's stable all weekend, they'll release her on Monday. But that's also dependent on Angie agreeing to follow her prescribed treatment, which is uncertain."

"Because that's a symptom."

"Yes. And, Mike, it's entirely possible that what we discussed is true -- that she's having a cluster of symptoms that are actually caused by borderline personality disorder."

"Shit," I sighed.

"Wait! When did you start cursing in English?"

"In the past month or so. I decided to basically abandon the use of Russian except for some church words and my pet name for Elizaveta. She and I agreed we're not going to try to teach our kids Russian, and we both agreed we didn't want any of the traditional Russian hijinks around wedding ceremonies. We'll have an Orthodox wedding but an American reception."

"Interesting."

"What are Angie's next steps?"

"All we can do is wait and see."

"What about work, school, and church?"

"We think church is good for her, and I've had a lengthy conversation with Father Stephen about his pastoral care for her. School and work are out of the question for the foreseeable future."

"That's only going to agitate her even more."

"We really don't have any options given the mix of drugs she'll be on for the foreseeable future."

"Will you be able to wean her from them?" I asked.

"We were successful last time because she followed the treatment plan. We're not sure she will this time."

"Last time, she had a reason to do it; now she doesn't," I observed. "This isn't meant to sound accusatory, but I know it will -- you took that from her. Not that you had a choice, mind you."

Doctor Mercer smiled wanly, "I know she blames me. It's par for the course."

"What about me seeing her?"

"We debated that, and the answer isn't clear."

"What about the wedding? Elizaveta had her grandmothers hold back Angie's invitation once she went into the hospital."

"That was probably wise. Let things settle. Let Angie get home, and we'll take it from there."

"OK. Shall I bring in Elizaveta?"

"If you're ready."

I nodded, got up, went to the door, and invited Elizaveta into Doctor Mercer's office. Elizaveta and I sat on the couch, and Doctor Mercer sat in a chair across from us.

"Let's talk about stress," Doctor Mercer said to begin the session. "There is going to be quite a bit of it in your relationship. A good part of the stress will originate with Mike's desired specialty, which is among the most stressful in a profession which is already stressful to begin with. Your relationship will also cause a certain amount of stress, both because you're marrying young and because of the demands of medical school and Residency on Mike's time. And, given where you've chosen to live, there will be some from Elizaveta's parents."

"My dad is cool," Elizaveta said. "My mom isn't too bad. My grandmothers, on the other hand..."

"I had a Russian grandmother," Doctor Mercer said with a wry smile. "So I know what THAT is like! And like the stress from medical school or Residency, it can't be avoided and will have to be managed. Starting a family will also create a significant amount of stress because of Mike's necessary time away from home. Do you still have the intention of waiting?"

"At least until Elizaveta graduates from High School," I replied. "We'll discuss it then, though I'd say that's most likely when we'll start trying."

"After lots and lots of practice!" Elizaveta exclaimed, much to my surprise, and with only the slightest hint of blush.

Doctor Mercer smiled, "That is not uncommon amongst newlyweds. But remember, stress can affect that, too. And your time together might even have to be planned, or at least arranged, around Mike's schedule. That can create its own stress."

"You're not filling me with optimism, Doctor," I replied.

"But it is the reality you've chosen. That said, a solid, successful, and happy marriage will help you through what will be the most grueling six years imaginable. Shall we talk a bit about techniques that will help you manage the stress?"

"Yes," Elizaveta and I both agreed.

"First and foremost, you need to talk to each other about what's causing your stress. And that means you need to truly listen to each other. Much of what you'll talk about can't be changed, only managed. Talking about it is a good way to

release some of the stress and to let the other person know the things which are inducing stress. You can do this as a couple, though having a third party present at times might be helpful. In your case, I'd suggest your priest or the doctor and his wife in your parish."

"Not you?" I asked.

"Consider your priest and the doctor as your GPs and me as your specialist. Most of the time, they'll be able to help you, but on occasion, you'll need something they can't provide. I do want to make one point -- it's important to avoid whining, grouching, or complaining, as those make it difficult for anyone to listen, and that includes the two of you listening to each other. You both practice confession, right?"

"Yes," I replied as Elizaveta nodded.

"And if I understand Orthodox confession, it's a conversation?"

"You might even call it a doctor-patient conversation," I replied. "Symptoms are listed, questions are asked, a diagnosis is given, and then medication is prescribed in the form of prayer, fasting, and so on. There's a line in the rite where the priest warns the penitent to be honest and open, lest he or she come to the Great Physician and leave unhealed."

"Then I think you both have a good basis for communicating. Let's discuss a few basic stress reduction techniques. Moderate exercise is a very good one, as it helps reduce some of the physical effects of stress. Mike, do you intend to restart your karate lessons?"

"At some point, but for now, time is at a premium. To take it seriously means three lessons a week, at least, plus practice, which would mean at least an hour a

day, not counting travel. I'm not sure I can afford that kind of time, though I'll reevaluate once I get into the routine in the Fall."

"You still run, right?"

"Every day, either around the campus or in the gym, depending on the weather. There are sidewalks in the neighborhood where we'll live, so I can run there. I'll have to figure out what to do when the weather doesn't allow running outside."

"What do you do now?"

"Run in the gym at Taft."

"Any sports?"

"My father-in-law is paying for golf lessons. He seems to think it's mandatory that doctors know how to play golf!"

"Lawyers, too," Doctor Mercer replied. "Larry Walsh, the attorney who has offices on the first floor of this building, is an avid golfer."

"And you?" I asked.

"I don't have an MD or JD, so, no, I don't! I wasn't issued a set of golf clubs with my license!" she said with a smile. "Though my husband plays casually. Is that something you intend to keep up?"

"So far, yes. But again, it's an issue of available time."

"Which, in and of itself, is going to be stress-inducing because you'll have to prioritize your time and likely give up some things you like to do or do them less

until you graduate from medical school and finish your Residency. Elizaveta, do you exercise?"

"Only in gym class, but I thought I'd start running with Mike."

"You should start as soon as the weather gets nice," I said. "Otherwise, I won't get much exercise when we first run together."

"Running is good, but you both might consider free weights for a bit of strength training. I'm not talking heavy weights, but just enough to help you with muscle tone. Mike, it probably wouldn't be a bad idea for you to talk to someone with a background in physical therapy or physical education who can help you come up with a simple exercise program to add to your running. I believe you'd only need a few minutes a day, and it will pay dividends in keeping you physically strong and mentally healthy."

"I'll ask Doctor Evgeni if he knows someone," I said.

"Good. Another very good stress reduction technique is to use music -- listening and playing. Mike, how are you doing with your guitar?"

"I still play."

"He's really, really good!" Elizaveta exclaimed.

"I wouldn't go quite that far," I chuckled. "My voice makes up for my failings with the instrument."

"But you enjoy it, and it's relaxing, right?"

"Yes."

"And I take it you still suffer from your addiction to collecting albums?"

I chuckled and nodded, "I do, and my friends fed the beast by buying me a CD player for my birthday."

"Last Saturday, right?"

"Yes."

"Happy belated birthday!"

"Thanks."

"Elizaveta, what about you?"

"I like to listen to music; I'm just not as crazy about it as Mike is! And I'm taking piano lessons. Mike and I have played together a few times. We plan to sing *Up Where We Belong* as a duet at our wedding."

"Good. Let me ask you about religious services. I know the Orthodox Church has a very extensive cycle of services. Do you attend all of them?"

"As many as possible," Elizaveta replied, "though I don't skip school except for Holy Friday, so I miss some morning Festal services throughout the year if they aren't on weekends or during breaks."

"I'm going to assume you willingly go to church?"

"My parents brought me to church when I was born, and it's just part of my life. I like going to church and the services. If I didn't, I would never even think about being the wife of a deacon."

"Do you find the religious services relaxing or comforting?"

Elizaveta laughed softly. "Comforting. I still don't understand how Mike can find the services relaxing, especially when he's so busy chanting or being a subdeacon or serving in the altar or all the other stuff he has to do!"

"It's mentally, emotionally, and spiritually calming," I replied. "It can be physically demanding, but I feel so refreshed that I never really notice. And the daily, weekly, and yearly cycles are very comforting. I tell time by the Church calendar and the cycle of services. This was the week of the Publican and Pharisee, and tonight, we'll have Vespers for the Sunday of the Prodigal Son. This is the twenty-second time I'll repeat the cycle, and I hope to do it for another sixty or seventy years! Church has always been the foundation of stability even when my life is otherwise chaotic."

"It hasn't been as bad the last year or so, has it?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"Except for Angie, no, it hasn't; at least not since Liz and my parents reconciled and Elizaveta put on the shackles."

"I did NOT!" she protested.

"I was teasing! But you did basically demand I marry you."

"Because you were being a complete «ГОВНЮК» (*govnyuk*)!" she declared, causing me to laugh at her use of profanity. ("shithead")

"So now we've changed roles?" Doctor Mercer asked with a smirk.

"She may have a point," I replied with a silly grin.

"Oh, please!" Elizaveta exclaimed. "Except for Katy Malenkov, you ignored ALL the girls at Saint Michael! If I hadn't come to you and made my case, you would STILL be looking in all the wrong places!"

"OK, you DO have a point."

"Thank you!" Elizaveta replied smugly.

"You were a bit young before last Summer, don't you think?" Doctor Mercer asked.

"I was a young woman who had all the necessary skills to be a wife by the time I was thirteen!" Elizaveta answered feistily.

"Don't fight this losing battle, Doc," I chuckled. "She's one hundred percent Russian even if she mostly acts American!"

"I have to say I've never encountered a young woman so determined to marry at such a young age and so well prepared, at least with regard to domestic skills."

"You think I'm immature?" Elizaveta asked.

"I think you lack life experience," Doctor Mercer said gently.

"And how much experience did you have with being married?" Elizaveta challenged.

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "None, of course. But I had dated and gone to college, so I had learned more about life."

"And I'll learn while I'm married. Did going to college and dating make your marriage perfect?"

"No, but it did give me some relationship skills, which helped."

"I don't see why I should have to date someone else to learn how to be Mike's wife."

"You don't. I was just pointing out that it was a way to gain experience and learn some valuable lessons."

"Yes, and all of Mike's 'experience' was positive?" Elizaveta asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Good or bad, it does help us learn how to deal with situations that may arise in the future."

"Including sleeping with multiple girls who weren't his wife?" Elizaveta asked, sounding a bit angry.

"On that, I think we may have to disagree in the general case," Doctor Mercer said. "I know your beliefs, based on the teachings of your church, but I don't believe that sexual activity before marriage is always wrong. I'm not telling you it's right for you or that you have to agree, just that I don't agree with you. Are you angry with Mike?"

"I was, a little bit; but not now. I am a bit disappointed in him, but there really isn't anything I can do about it at this point. And I'm not really going to worry about it; I only said something because of what you said."

"I am somewhat concerned that you might feel some resentment or anger about this in the future."

"Unfortunately, boys seem to regard purity as far less important than girls do, and according to my friends, there are very few boys who haven't had some experience, especially once they go to college. But even some of my friends chose not to stay pure. I think it's better to be able to make love with my husband than to have to fight temptation."

"But that's not your reason for marrying, is it?"

Elizaveta smirked, "Not the first one, anyway!"

Doctor Mercer laughed, "OK. Let's talk a bit more about identifying stress and managing it."

That took the rest of the fifty-minute session, and when we finished, Doctor Mercer asked to speak to me privately.

"You realize you aren't going to win many arguments in your marriage, right?" she asked with a silly smile once Elizaveta had gone to the waiting room.

"I was raised by an Orthodox mom and an Orthodox grandmother and dated Tasha for a couple of years. So yeah, I know!"

"One thing you need to do is set boundaries for areas where you'll hold firm, or she'll dominate you the way your mom dominated your dad."

I nodded, "I know. I won't run away, but I will pick my battles carefully. Most things simply aren't worth fighting about."

"That's a good attitude, so long as you don't take it as far as your dad did."

"I won't. I learned several very good lessons in both being assertive and in being patient."

"Your dad and Jocelyn?"

"Yes. And before you ask your next question, yes, the issue of my sexual activity is settled. You brought it up and appeared to condone it."

"Conceptually, yes."

"I avoided THAT problem," I grinned.

Doctor Mercer laughed, "You have changed quite a bit from that basically naïve, innocent kid I first met. You'll make a good husband and a good doctor, Mike, but you're going to have to work at it."

"That's a given. Do you want to see me before May?"

"Only if you need me for something. We'll keep in touch by telephone, and I'll keep you updated on Angie's condition."

"OK. Let me know if we should send her an invitation. I assume you received yours?"

"I did. My husband and I plan to be there."

"Then I'll see you at the end of May if nothing comes up."

I left the office, took Elizaveta's hand, and we went out to my car.

"What did she want?"

"Just to make sure I knew I was marrying a Russian woman! As if I could forget!"

"What did she say?"

"Just that I shouldn't behave like my dad and avoid conflict."

"So long as you do as I say, there won't BE any conflict!" Elizaveta teased.

"And is that REALLY how it's going to be?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No, of course not! We'll talk about everything and decide together."

We exchanged a soft kiss, then got into my car and headed to Rutherford to have lunch with Liz and Paul.



February 9, 1985, Rutherford, Ohio

"Hi, Mikey!" Liz gushed when Elizaveta and I walked into Lou's. "Hi, Elizaveta!"

"Hi, Liz! Hi, Paul!"

"Mike, Elizaveta," Paul added with a nod.

The hostess led us to a booth where we sat down. She took our drink orders and went to get them.

"How is Angie?" Liz asked.

"Still in the hospital. They hope she can go home on Monday, but she's not good."

"That sucks."

"My sentiments exactly. How are things here?"

"School is good, and work is fine. Paul was released from parole, so he's a free man again. Well, he's MINE, but he's free from the government!"

"So, out of the frying pan and into the fire?" I asked with a smirk.

"Hah-hah."

"All teasing aside, that's great! How are things with Mom?"

"Fine. She and I have coffee once a week, usually on Tuesday evening because that's when I have off. Dad is still being Dad, but it's better than how it was at first."

"Good. Hopefully, time will help. Paul, how is work?"

"I can't complain at all. I'm still on nights, but Mr. Zhuravlyov has me doing the reconciliation of the cash drawer and preparing the bank deposit."

"That means he trusts you, and that's good."

"It is, though he's talking about retiring in a few years, so I might end up with a new boss."

"He's going to sell?" I asked.

"So it seems. He wants to move to Florida, where it's warm."

"A number of people from Holy Transfiguration have moved to Florida or Arizona when they've retired."

"How are things with you?"

"This is probably my easiest semester of the four years," I replied. "And that's a good thing given everything else that's going on."

"Wedding planning?"

"Leaving that to Elizaveta's grandmothers. I assume you two received your invitation?"

"We did," Liz said. "It arrived on Thursday. We'll be there!"

"Cool. How is Emmy doing?"

"Great! She loves her criminal justice classes, and she's started working out at the gym. She's getting really ripped!"

"Is she dating?"

"Nothing serious, but she has some guys she sees. She'll pick one to bring with her to the wedding, I'm sure. How is Clark doing?"

"Good. He's interviewing with a company in Chicago that makes the computer software he's been using. I don't remember the name."

"What kind of job?"

"Quality Assurance for their statistical software. He'd also work on his Master's part-time at the University of Chicago, which I think is where the software originally came from. His job would be verifying the output of the programs or whatever."

"You and computers," Liz laughed. "You just blank out pretty much everything."

The waitress brought our drinks, took our food order, and went to put it in with the kitchen.

"What's wrong with computers, Mike?" Elizaveta asked.

"What's right with them?" I countered.

"We have them at school and I enjoyed the programming class I had Freshman year. It was fun."

"Shoot me now!" I groaned.

"What?!" Elizaveta exclaimed in surprise.

"They're totally frustrating, and I only managed to get an A in my computer class because Kristin helped me every step of the way. You actually like them?"

"Yes. I actually was thinking of asking Dad to get me a Macintosh and a printer."

"That's up to you," I replied.

"Seriously, Mike. It'll be perfect for writing papers and doing homework."

"My typewriter works just fine."

"Forget it, Elizaveta," Liz said. "My brother is as stubborn as a mule on some things."

"Love you, too, Lizard Breath."

"Mike, would you be upset if I got a computer?" Elizaveta asked.

It really didn't bother me, though the casual spending of several thousand dollars, if I was right about the cost of that computer setup, boggled my mind. It wasn't that I was jealous or didn't think Viktor could spend his money however he wanted; it was just that something like that would have been a ridiculous luxury for my family when I was in High School, if we could even have afforded it. That said, now that my tuition was being covered by Viktor, my parents would have extra money, something which had never been the case when I was growing up.

"No, I won't be upset."

"You're sure?"

"Positive, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)."

"*Kitten*," Liz whispered to Paul.

"And that's about the only Russian he uses these days," Elizaveta said with a soft smile.

"Him?! My brother?!"

"Times change, Lizzy," I said. "We're not going to teach our kids Russian."

"What will Grandpa say about that?"

I grinned, "Nothing. He's mostly spoken English to me since I was about fourteen, and he wants the family to be American. He's not like Deacon Vasily

that way. And Saint Michael doesn't have nearly as many families who try to retain the old ways as Holy Transfiguration did."

"Just wow," Liz said, shaking her head.

"And besides," I grinned, "Grandpa is getting what he wanted."

"I'm with Uncle Alex," Liz said.

"I realize. And there's no need to rehash that old argument."

The waitress brought our food, and after I prayed, we began eating. Liz and Elizaveta chatted back and forth about the wedding, our plans for our honeymoon, and our trip to Europe while Paul and I simply ate and listened. When we finished our meal, Elizaveta and I bade Liz and Paul 'goodbye' and headed to my grandparents' house for tea. We spent about forty-five minutes there, then drove to West Monroe for a brief visit with my parents before heading back to McKinley for Vespers.



February 9, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Subdeacon," Alyssa said, addressing me that way because I was wearing my cassock, "I'd like you to meet my mom and dad, Mr. and Mrs. Greenwald. Mom, Dad, this is Subdeacon Michael."

"Pleased to meet you," I said. "Welcome to Saint Michael the Archangel."

"Thank you," Mrs. Greenwald said. "It's nice to meet you as well."

"I'm glad you decided to attend Vespers," I said.

"Alyssa and Mark have told us so much about the parish and your teaching, so we thought we'd see for ourselves."

"It can be a bit overwhelming coming from a church that follows the Reformed tradition."

"She tried to prepare us," Mr. Greenwald said. "We promise not to run screaming from the building!"

I chuckled, "I haven't seen that particular reaction, but I have seen people walk out because they were uncomfortable. I need to go into the altar to help Father Nicholas, but I'll be available after the service to answer any questions you have."

"Thank you," he replied.

I left Mark, Alyssa, and her parents and went into the altar.

"Alyssa's parents are here," I said to Father Nicholas.

"That's good! Mark's parents decided on Our Savior Lutheran, right?"

"Yes. Jocelyn saw them there last Sunday. I'm not sure what Alyssa's parents plan to do. They said they wanted to 'see for themselves'."

"A good first step. I'll greet them after the service."

"I offered to answer any questions they might have."

"Good. Shall we begin?"

"Yes, Father," I replied.

About an hour later, I introduced Father Nicholas to the Greenwalds, then accompanied them, Mark, and Alyssa to the narthex, where Elizaveta joined us.

"This is my fiancée, Elizaveta," I said. "Elizaveta, these are Alyssa's parents, the Greenwalds."

"Nice to meet you," Elizaveta said.

"And you," Mrs. Greenwald replied.

"Do you have any questions?" I asked.

"It was a lot to take in," Mr. Greenwald said. "And if I understand, this was a simple service compared to some."

I nodded, "Yes, that's true."

"I have to ask about all the kissing," Mrs. Greenwald said. "The paintings, the cross your minister held, his hand, and so on. If you'll pardon me, it almost seems like idolatry."

I smiled and nodded, "I can see why you would say that, and the simplest explanation is also the most difficult one, and that is that nominalism has taken over in Western thought. For us, the icons, which you called paintings, are true symbols which manifest the reality behind them. Thus, the reverence paid to an icon is actually paid to the person represented by the icon. And reverence, such as a bow, or curtsy, or standing when a judge enters a courtroom, or the kissing of a hand, is not worship, which is reserved for God alone.

"And if you're wondering about the icons themselves, and why we have them, they represent the 'great cloud of witnesses' in Hebrews -- *'Therefore, since we have*

so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.'

"And, lest you think the icons are of dead people, remember in Revelation, the souls of the saints who were under the altar in Heaven -- '*When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'*'. They are, of course, alive in Christ and clearly aware of events on earth."

"And praying to Mary?" Mr. Greenwald asked.

"It's better stated as praying 'with' Mary. She is, as the Angel Gabriel said to her, the most 'blessed among women', and we are simply asking for her intercession. And, believe it or not, that's Scriptural as well."

"How so?"

"When Jesus performed his first miracle, the request was made to his mom, not directly to him. She went to him and interceded on their behalf. Some might even say, tongue in cheek, she nagged him into performing his first miracle."

He laughed, "I hadn't exactly thought of it in those terms, but isn't that a stretch?"

"Less of a stretch than *sola fide* when the words 'by faith alone' only appear in the Scriptures preceded by the word 'not?'"

"Mark and Alyssa pointed that out, and I have to say I was surprised when I checked my concordance and discovered that was correct. But what about Corinthians, where it says 'not as a result of works'?"

"We are, indeed, saved by God's grace, which comes through faith. But what is true faith, according to James? To care for widows and orphans. In other words, faith cannot be 'alone'. That faith is dead, as James says quite clearly. So, if faith without works is dead and cannot save us, then the idea of 'faith alone' simply cannot be true."

"Mr. Greenwald," Mark said, "James is really clear on this. He tells us that we have to be doers of the Word, not merely hearers who delude ourselves. More importantly, he writes about Abraham and says that faith was working with his works and that, as a result of Abraham's works, his faith was perfected. Subdeacon Mike pointed out during catechism that it's synergy -- just as the body without the spirit is dead, so too faith without works is dead. They have to go together. You can't separate them."

"As Paul says in Corinthians," I continued, "we are fellow workers with God, tending the vineyard, and each of us will be rewarded according to our own labor. Synergy again. And that work will be tested by fire -- that is, God's redeeming love -- and any man's work which remains will be rewarded, and even those works which are burned up have value, in that the worker is saved."

"Is there something we could read which would explain all of this?"

I chuckled, "There is, and there isn't. I know that sounds like a contradiction, but the only way to truly understand Orthodoxy is to attend the services, to pray, and to live a Christian life. That said, we do have a book in the bookstore, *The Orthodox Way*, which is a companion volume to a book I gave Mark and Alyssa, which will explain quite a bit. But it's like reading Cliff's Notes rather than the actual book. I'd be more than happy to give you a copy."

"We'll pay for it," Mr. Greenwald said.

We went to the church hall, and I opened the bookstore cabinet and extracted a copy of the book. Mr. Greenwald handed me a \$10 bill. I made change, recorded the sale, and then closed up the bookstore cabinet. He thanked me, and then we walked out of the church with them. I encouraged them to return, and then Elizaveta and I got into my car for the drive to her house.

"Did you see the look on their faces when you said I was your fiancée?" she asked as I pulled out of the parking lot.

"Just that brief hint of surprise," I said, then teased, "or perhaps a hint of jealousy on Mr. Greenwald's part!"

Elizaveta laughed, "Because you're going to marry a fifteen-year-old? Well, sixteen when we actually marry."

"A sexy, beautiful fifteen-year-old," I corrected.

"Do you think they'll come back?"

"I think it's likely. Asking for something to read tells me that they are truly interested, though it could be just to understand what their kids believe. You know we get a few visitors every month who are basically just coming for a 'look-see' and never show up again. We greet them, encourage them, and offer to answer questions, but mostly it doesn't matter. That said, some of them DO stay. And I think with the campus ministry, we'll see more."

"You mean like your friends? But they aren't going to convert."

"Ah, but we don't know what will happen down the road, do we? A small seed planted now might blossom into a beautiful tree in the future. Our job is to witness by our lives and worship. And you know from the parable of the workers, it doesn't matter if someone comes at the first hour or the eleventh hour."

"What about people who leave? Like your sister or your uncle?"

"All we can do is pray for them and love them," I said. "No amount of arguing or preaching is going to change their minds. As I said at Christmas, my uncle is entitled to his opinion. And that's true even if he's wrong. The same goes for my sister. But I don't love them any less, and I pray for them, along with all of my family and friends, every day. And I witness by my life, such as it is."

"But they no longer believe in God, right?"

"No, they don't. Remember the father of the young boy possessed by a demon who said he believed but needed help with his unbelief? Who knows what will happen in the future?"

"But what about judgment?"

"I believe in a compassionate and gracious God, one who is slow to anger and abounding in love. One who does not deal with us according to our sins and who does not stay angry with us. And yes, I know that refers to those who fear God, but I'm in no position to decide who does and who doesn't. You know, 'judgment is mine alone, sayeth the Lord'. All I can do is worry about my own salvation and that of my wife and children and leave the rest in God's hands."

"Can I ask something which might be very private?"

"If you can't ask your husband, who can you ask? And if my wife can't ask me, who can?"

"What do you ask for when you pray for Clarissa, Robby, and Lee?"

"The same thing I do for everyone I pray for! The only prayer request I make is 'Lord, have mercy!', just like in the litanies during church services. I never ask for specific things, only that God will have mercy on whomever I pray for. What that means, I leave up to God and His grace."

"You never ask for anything?"

"God isn't a «djinn», where I rub the lamp and get three wishes, though if it were Barbara Eden..."

Elizaveta smacked my arm and commanded, "Behave!"

"Yes, Dear," I said deadpan.

"Just finish what you were saying; I mean without having impure thoughts about an actress!"

I chuckled, "Sorry, and I hope you know I was teasing you."

"Yes, of course."

"The point of prayer is to align myself to the will of God, not to bend Him to my will. It's not about what I want but about what He wants. That was exactly the example Jesus set for us -- to be conformed to God's will, whatever that is."

"Uhm, but..." Elizaveta started but then stopped.

"You can ask, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I said gently. ("Kitten")

"What about Angie? Don't you want her to get well?"

"Yes, of course. And don't you think God knows that, even without me asking directly?"

"Sure. I guess my question is why she's suffering, and God doesn't simply cure her?"

"I have no answer to that question, and I'm not sure I ever will. I tend strongly towards what Irenaeus taught, in that we live in the best of all possible worlds, when one takes into account the fact that in order to know and do the good, a real choice between good and evil must exist. I suppose the best example would be Jonah -- his suffering both fulfilled God's plan AND brought Jonah closer to God. We read the entire book of Jonah at the liturgy on Holy Saturday morning precisely because he is a type of Christ and precisely because his suffering brought the people of Nineveh to God while improving Jonah's relationship with God.

"There was a book which I read when I was a Sophomore in High School called *Evil and the God of Love* by John Hick. He set Augustinian Free Will against Irenaean human development. While I think Hick went too far, stating that in the end, everyone would be saved, he points out the serious flaws in Augustinian theodicy. If you think about it, if we take the Western interpretation of 'good' in Genesis, there is no possible way for sin to enter into the world. If, on the other hand, we see 'good' meaning that it was fit for God's purposes, then it makes perfect sense. We are not born perfect, just innocent."

"So, all the bad stuff is necessary?"

"That would be the logical conclusion. There's more to it, but in the end, the world is how it needs to be to perfect our souls and achieve true salvation, where we freely choose to do good and to love God. That is what I strive to do, and it is the Orthodox way."

XLIX. Theology, Psychology, and Friendship

Sunday Of The Prodigal Son -- February 10, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Sunday morning, when I left the altar during the canon of Matins to retrieve Father Nicholas' homily, which he'd left in his office, I was pleased to see Mr. and Mrs. Greenwald standing near Mark and Alyssa. When I returned to the altar with Father Nicholas' notecards, I quietly let him know that they were in attendance.

As the Matins moved to the Divine Liturgy, the hymns foretold the destination of our Lenten journey, which was nine weeks away. From the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, each week built on the previous one, leading to the nadir of Great and Holy Friday and the pinnacle of Holy Pascha. I'd been through it twenty-one times and clearly remembered seventeen of them. The cycle of services still generated the sadness and joy they had from the time I'd become aware of those emotions.

This year had something unique to look forward to six weeks after Pascha, and that was my wedding to Elizaveta. In some ways, it hadn't hit me and probably wouldn't until Father Nicholas led Elizaveta and me around the table in the 'Dance of Isiah'. The same could be said for my ordination, which was about two months after my wedding and wouldn't feel 'real' until the bishop put his hands on my head and I raised the chalice for the first time during the Divine Liturgy.

I refocused on the liturgy just in time for the *anaphora*, and when the service ended, Elizaveta and I chose to sit with Mark, Alyssa, and her parents rather than taking our usual spot with Tasha, Nik, and Elizaveta's friends.

"Good afternoon," I said when Elizaveta and I sat down.

"Good afternoon," Mr. Greenwald replied. "The kids were right about how long the service is!"

I nodded, "You get used to it, but it can be pretty hard on your feet at first."

"To be honest, we sat for a good portion of the service. Mark and Alyssa told us the times we should stand."

"We each do what we are able to do," I replied with a smile. "Being here is the first step in what is a lifetime journey."

"What about assurance?"

"The promises made in the Scriptures are that the Church will be saved, and the Church is composed of those who love God. If you think about it, the assurance offered by your old church was contingent on you not showing yourself to be reprobate in the future, but I have to ask, how many sins does it take to be 'reprobate'?"

"A very interesting theological question for which I never received a satisfactory answer," he replied.

"If you love God, you're in," I said with a smile. "It's pretty much that simple. Now, that's no license to sin, but it does allow us to fall, get up, and move forward. Call it the trajectory rather than any individual acts. Fundamentally, any deity who decided, before he created you, to send you to Hell to prove he was just, isn't just by any definition of that word."

"This entire experience is very different from anything I've ever known," Mrs. Greenwald said. "Bert was up until 3:00am reading the book you gave us last night, and he was telling me about it at breakfast this morning."

"The best way to learn is to come to the services, listen to the hymns and prayers, and hear the Gospel and the homily. Sunday school is a plus, but everything you need is found in the services and in your daily prayer rule."

"We're not used to a ten-minute sermon," Mr. Greenwald said. "It's usually about forty-five minutes of verse-by-verse Bible teaching."

"For us, that's incorporated directly into the services, as I suspect you noticed."

"There was a lot of Scripture quoted, that's for sure!" he agreed.

"During Lent, we have extra services on Fridays -- either Compline or an *Akathist*. And on Wednesdays, instead of Vespers, we have the Divine Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts. There are also other extra services at various times. They're listed in the bulletin, and there's also a complete list of every service between now and the end of Bright Week, which is the week following Pascha, on the table in the narthex."

"That's your Easter service, right? The one that starts around 11:00pm and goes until around 2:30am?"

"And then the party!" Elizaveta interjected.

"I can safely say I've never been to a party that started at 2:30am!" Mr. Greenwald said.

"I was two months old when I went to my first one!" I said with a grin.

"I made my mom miss Pascha!" Elizaveta declared. "I was born on Great and Holy Friday!"

"Mike, can I ask you a personal question?" Mrs. Greenwald said.

"Mom..." Alyssa warned.

"It's OK," I replied, fairly certain of the question she was going to ask.

"My apologies, but isn't Elizaveta awfully young to marry?"

I steeled myself for the righteous indignation which I could FEEL emanating from the young woman next to me who was soon to be my wife.

"No, I'm not," Elizaveta said, far more calmly than I'd expected. "I'll be sixteen when we marry, and it's exactly what I want to do. It's totally my decision, and I'm sure it's the correct one."

"But don't you think you should finish High School?"

"Yes, of course! We won't start a family until after I graduate."

"What about college?"

"I'm taking the necessary classes for college-bound students, but as of right now, I don't plan to go. I prefer to stay home with our kids, if possible, and it should be, given Mike will be a doctor."

"Why not wait?" Mr. Greenwald asked.

"Dad!" Alyssa protested. "I explained why! The bishop wants to ordain Subdeacon Michael to the diaconate, and once that happens, he's not allowed to marry. He has to marry beforehand, or not at all."

"Why is that, Mike?" he asked.

"Can you imagine the potential for scandal if a clergyman were dating?"

"That happens all the time with our youth pastors; it's normal."

"And has there ever been an issue? A nasty break-up? Some impropriety?"

"Remember what happened to Bill!" Mark prompted.

"An unfortunate situation, to be sure," Mr. Greenwald said.

"He had to resign because his fiancée was pregnant," Mark said. "He's selling shoes at the mall now instead of pastoring a church."

"That is exactly the kind of situation we avoid," I replied. "And can you imagine a priest counseling a young woman on marriage if he were interested in her? The conflict of interest could destroy a parish!"

"That makes sense," Mrs. Greenwald said. "But why not wait a few years to marry?"

"To what end?" Elizaveta asked. "Nothing will change in two years, and I am sure I want to be a deacon's wife and a doctor's wife. I spoke with our former deacon's wife as well as the wife of a doctor, plus our priest and a professional counselor. We have the blessing of our bishop and of my parents." Her voice became firm, and I could hear the «бабушка» (*babushka*) she was to become speaking, "This is exactly what I want and exactly what I intend to do!"

"Nobody is making you do this?" Mrs. Greenwald asked.

I laughed softly, "Elizaveta came to me and basically demanded I marry her. If anyone is being 'compelled', it's me because I'm not sure I would have survived saying 'no!'"

"Mom," Alyssa said. "Would you be upset if Mark and I got engaged?"

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"No, I'm just asking."

"No, I don't think I would."

"I'm only about two years older than Elizaveta, and Mark is four years younger than Mike."

"Those two years make a big difference."

"She's WAY more prepared to be a wife and mom than I am!" Alyssa said. "She cooks, bakes, and sews, none of which I'm any good at! You still do my laundry because you never think I do it right!"

"There's more to marriage than that!" Mrs. Greenwald protested.

"I think she'll figure that one out fairly easily," Alyssa said with a smirk, surprising me, as I'd never heard her make a risqué remark in the time I'd known her.

I managed not to laugh out loud, but Elizaveta giggled softly, covering her mouth with her hand, and Mark tried his best but couldn't stop himself from laughing.

"Alyssa Michelle Greenwald!" her mom exclaimed in that voice that parents reserve for a three-name reprimand.

"What?" Alyssa asked petulantly. "I'm not supposed to know that's what married people do? Give me a break! I had health class! I'm not totally clueless! And, yes, it's for marriage, not before!"

The last bit was said with a glance to Mark to make sure HE understood that he was going to have to wait.

"That is also the teaching of the Orthodox Church," I said.

"I should hope so!" Mr. Greenwald declared.

We finished our light meal, and I was happy to see that the Greenwalds decided to stay for Sunday School. I went to the classroom where the High School and College students gathered to teach while Father Nicholas taught the adult class, Matushka Natalya taught the grade school class, and Mr. Varlov taught the middle school class. As was usual for the pre-Lenten season, we discussed the significance of the day's commemoration, which was the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, and discussed how it related to the events which would unfold over the next two months.

When Sunday School ended, Elizaveta and I bade 'goodbye' to Mark, Alyssa, and her parents, then walked out to my car, where I removed my cassock before we got in to head for Tasha's apartment for our usual Sunday afternoon with her and Nik.

"Did you catch that look Alyssa gave Mark?" Elizaveta asked with a smirk as I pulled out of the church parking lot.

"I did. And I have to say I was surprised you didn't respond harshly to the question about your age."

"Have you ever heard Matushka Natalya or Matushka Anastasia speak harshly?"

"No."

"And do you think the bishop would be happy to have me speak that way to inquirers?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then don't you think I should act like a Matushka now?"

"Obviously," I chuckled. "But Russian women are not known for moderation!"

"You just wait, husband! You'll see a complete lack of moderation where it counts!"

"And where might that be?" I asked with a smirk.

"You'll have to wait to find out!" she teased.



February 11, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday, when I returned to the dorm after Physical Chemistry, I found a message pinned to the board outside my room asking me to call Doctor Mercer. I

went into my room, set my books down on the desk, then picked up the handset and dialed. Doctor Mercer's assistant put me through right away.

"Hi, Mike."

"Hi, Doctor Mercer. I assume you're calling about Angie?"

"Yes. She's not being released because she's not cooperating with taking her medication."

"So what happens now?" I asked.

"They'll continue providing it via IV."

"But she can't stay at Clermont County long-term, can she?"

"No. She'll have to move, most likely to The Christ Hospital. They have a licensed inpatient unit."

"Would she be committed?"

"No. Her parents will check her in. They're her guardians, so they can do that without a formal legal process."

"Do you think it might help if I visited her? Maybe she'd take her medication if I asked."

"That's risky because you're setting her up to ask you for something in return; something you can't give her."

"Wonderful."

"It's common amongst patients who resist following their treatment plans and not just ones who are being treated for mental illness. A lot of times, kids will basically blackmail their parents by only following their treatment plan if they get something in exchange. You'll see that in the ER. You'll also see parents who seek medical intervention for their kids, which isn't strictly necessary and patients who will try to manipulate you into giving them narcotics."

"And you think she's going to ask me for some kind of commitment or sex?"

"It might be more subtle -- a promise to come to see her regularly, for example."

"I just never saw her as manipulative."

"She probably doesn't see it that way, either. It's as much out of desperation as it is anything else. Obviously, I'm just speculating."

"And she's lucid enough to do that?"

"If you remember how she was before we weaned her off the medication, she's a bit better than that because we know the proper dosages."

"What if I brought Elizaveta with me?"

"That runs the risk of setting her off."

"Then, pardon me, but what the fuck CAN be done?" I asked, sure I sounded as perturbed and exasperated as I was.

"Mike, relax," Doctor Mercer said gently.

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"Sorry," I said as calmly as I could.

"You're frustrated, which is normal. I'm frustrated, and so is Angie's psychiatrist. So are her parents. And Mike, so is Angie."

"Let me ask this -- if I came to see her with Elizaveta, what's the worst possible outcome?"

"She puts you in the 'bad' category and never lets you out."

I sighed, "Does that really matter at this point?"

"I think it does. Will you accept talking again at the end of the week to see if we've made any progress?"

"You're the doctor," I replied. "I'm not, and even when I become a doctor, this won't be my field of expertise. I have to defer to you, even if I don't necessarily like it."

"The best doctors in the world are the ones who know their limits and work right to the edge of that envelope. Call me on Friday around this time, please."

"OK," I agreed, though I wasn't happy about it.

"Hang in there, Mike."

"I won't go off half-cocked or do anything foolish."

"I'm more concerned about depression than I am about a bout of foolish spontaneous behavior. Talk with Clarissa and Jocelyn and ask them to keep an eye on you, please. They're at school with you, so they're a better choice than Elizaveta for the next few days."

"I will," replied. "And thanks."

"You're welcome. I wish I'd had better news for you. I'll speak to you Friday."

We said 'goodbye', and I replaced the handset. I opened the door to my room and saw Jocelyn and Clarissa waiting in the lounge. They saw me and came to the room. After they came in, I closed the door most of the way, and the three of us sat on the couch with me between my two friends.

"Doctor Mercer said I should ask you two to watch for signs of depression."

"Angie?" Clarissa asked.

"Yeah," I sighed. "She's refusing to take her prescribed medications, so they're going to check her into the psych ward at The Christ Hospital in Cincinnati. I suggested going to see her and trying to convince her, but Doctor Mercer said that wasn't a good idea. She's afraid Angie will try to extract promises from me in exchange for taking her drugs; promises I obviously couldn't keep. I even offered to take Elizaveta with me, but Doctor Mercer is afraid that might set her off. I feel helpless."

"Is this how you felt when I tried to kill myself?" Jocelyn asked quietly.

"Pretty much, though, given our relationship, that was worse. I told you about sitting on the bench in the snowstorm without a coat, hat, or gloves after the Polaroids."

"I'm sorry."

"It's in the past, Jos. Everything is forgiven, and you forgave me for everything I did."

"I know, and I'm grateful. So what now?"

"I'm supposed to call Doctor Mercer on Friday for an update. Until then, there isn't much I can do except pray for Angie."

Clarissa put her arm around my shoulder, "I'm sure I'm repeating what you said, but this sucks."

"Tell me about it," I sighed.

"Put on some upbeat music," Jocelyn suggested.

I got up and put on *Centerfield*.



February 14, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"I'm sorry about my parents," Alyssa said when she and Mark arrived at Doctor Blahnik's house on Thursday for catechism.

"It's nothing I haven't heard before," I replied. "And Elizaveta IS young. But that also doesn't mean she isn't ready to get married. In fact, I'd say you could argue she's more ready than I am! Did your parents say anything more?"

"No. I think the way she responded pretty much left them without an argument."

"I agree. How long have you two been discussing marriage?"

"What?" she asked innocently.

I smiled, "I saw the look that passed between the two of you when you made the comment about the limits of physical relationships before marriage. And trust me, I'm well aware of the temptations that arise."

"About six months," Mark said. "We've been dating since Sophomore year."

"How serious is your conversation?" I asked.

He looked to Alyssa who raised her eyebrow.

"Serious enough, I guess," he replied. "I think we'll need to finish college first. We'd both have to work, and money would be very tight."

"But we could do it," Alyssa said, her voice very soft and almost longing.

I wondered, if, like Tasha, SHE was the one who, despite setting clear limits, had the stronger desire to get things out of order, as it were.

"If that's a consideration, you probably want to speak to Father Nicholas about it. He'd certainly want to arrange pre-marital counseling."

"Would you do that?" she asked.

I shook my head, "No, that's a pastoral issue, so it would be Father Nicholas who did it. After all, he's married and has boys in their early teens. I suggest you wait until after you're chrismated before you broach the subject with him. You have a lot to do just with catechism and your first Lenten journey. And given that Sunday is Meatfare, I think today is a good day to talk about the shape and form of the Lenten services and the cycle of feasts."

I began with the cycle of the so-called 'movable' feasts, such as Pentecost, whose dates were determined in relation to Pascha, and then the so-called 'fixed' feasts,

such as Theophany and Nativity, which were on set days each year. That occupied most of our time, so I was only able to spend about ten minutes describing the Lenten cycle of service.

"Are we supposed to attend every service?" Alyssa asked.

"That's the ideal," I replied. "But Father makes allowances for those of us who have outside obligations such as school or work. That said, if you can't make every Friday, make sure you attend at least once to hear the prayers of the *Akathist*. For Holy Week, do your best. I usually take Holy Friday off from school, and my professors have been accommodating. This semester, I don't have Thursday morning class, so I don't have a conflict with the Vespereal Divine Liturgy on Thursday morning, which celebrates the Last Supper."

"That whole thing boggles my mind," Mark said. "It's like everything is reversed."

"While this is reading back into something that evolved because people were impatient, the world was indeed turned upside down by the events of Holy Week."

"You just kind of casually admit that the theology was read back into the practice?"

"Sure. It's true, isn't it? But the fact we developed the theological meaning from the practice doesn't make it any less meaningful or helpful in understanding the key message of the cycle of services. Remember, in the end, all of this is about helping us achieve *theosis* -- to become like Christ and one with God. In fact, *theosis* is the very reason for the incarnation and made it necessary, even without the Fall. Man was always meant to be in true union with God, and that is only possible because of the true union of humanity and deity in Jesus Christ."

"Wait!" Mark protested. "You're saying that Jesus didn't come to save us from sin?"

"I thought that was clear! Christ came to save us from *death* which is what you'll hear in the Paschal troparion, but he didn't come ONLY to save us from death, but to bring us into proper union with God."

"That is NOT what we were taught at our former church."

"A serious problem with the Christian West is the overt focus on justification as if it were a legal transaction under Roman law; it isn't. You're going to have to forget much of what you learned in favor of what the Church, except for Rome and her daughter churches, has taught from the 1st century."

"But we're not Catholic."

"No, you aren't, but your doctrine is based on agreement or disagreement with Rome and still mostly exists within the same kind of theological framework. We need to tear down that framework and build a new one, and that's what we're doing. And you'll find as we go along, there are no verses which we need to handwave away or try to give some meaning besides a plain reading."

"But you think we'll be ready by Holy Saturday morning?" Alyssa inquired.

I nodded, "Yes, I do, because what matters is your heart, not in-depth theology. You have the rest of your lives to learn the theology, and it comes through the cycle of services, your daily prayers, and living a Christian life."

"What do we need to do with regard to baptism?" she asked.

"Pick your godparents and obtain baptismal gowns, which are really just plain white cotton gowns. You'll want to make sure you wear a bathing suit under yours because wet, white cotton is pretty revealing."

Mark laughed, and Alyssa blushed.

"Uh, yeah," she stammered. "Thanks for warning me!"

"How do we pick godparents?" Mark asked.

"Normally, they're chosen for you by your parents with input from the priest. In your cases, you select someone who you feel you'll be able to go to for advice and guidance."

"You?"

"You'll need to ask Father Nicholas, but I would accept on behalf of myself and Elizaveta if Father gives his blessing."

"He might not?"

"We're awfully young to fill that role for teenagers, but it's not out of the question. If you want a suggestion for someone older, I'd say Doctor Evgeni and his wife, Maria, would be a good option. But it's not up to me, in the end. This is something you'll need to work out with Father Nicholas. You also don't both need to select the same couple or individual. I suggest talking to Father after Vespers on Saturday."

"OK. What about patron saints?"

"For you, it's Saint Mark the Evangelist unless you prefer another Saint by that name. For Alyssa, the closest would be Elisha, who's called «Ἐλισαῖος» (*Elisaios*)

in Greek. If you don't prefer a male saint, then we can help you find an appropriate female saint."

"I think I'd prefer that."

"OK, we'll work on that. What about your parents? How are they doing?"

"I think they'll be back on Saturday, but I'm not totally sure. They're discussing it and reading the book you gave them."

"Good. Let me know if there is any way I can help."

"I will."

We left the house, and they headed home while I headed back to campus.



February 15, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday, having heard nothing, I called Doctor Mercer when I returned to the dorm from my Physical chemistry class. Angie was at The Christ Hospital and was still refusing to voluntarily take her medication.

"I want to see her," I said.

"Mike, please listen to me," Doctor Mercer said firmly. "If you go see her and ask her to start taking her medicine 'for you', she's going read far more into that than you can possibly agree to. And when she realizes that's the case, she might lose her entire grasp on reality."

"Then tell me how I can be her friend when you keep telling me to stay away from her!"

"There are no easy answers in cases like Angie's," Doctor Mercer replied. "Right now, I think you need to leave it to the medical doctors at the hospital."

"And if I disagree?"

"Think it through, Mike."

"I've been thinking about basically nothing EXCEPT how to help Angie," I replied. "No matter what else happens, on May 26th, Elizaveta and I are getting married. Unless you intend to hide that from Angie forever, which would mean I could never, ever see her, she's going to react badly. I don't think you can prevent that, and I don't think YOU think you can prevent that. The only way anyone could prevent that is if I broke off my betrothal with Elizaveta and promised to marry Angie, which is something I simply can't do, and not just because of Angie not being able to consent. I think we should simply tear off the bandage in one quick pull. Then deal with what is an inevitable future. Well, assuming neither Elizaveta nor I die in the next three-and-a-half months."

"You aren't alone in that thinking," Doctor Mercer said, her voice full of caution. "The senior Resident proposed that exact course of action, saying that it was better to manage the inevitable emotional and mental trauma while she's under direct care."

"What happened?"

"She was overruled by the Chief Psychiatric Attending."

"A guy?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I've heard from several people that women doctors are often not taken seriously by their male supervisors. I'm going to guess that happened here. They're, in effect, treating her as if she's not a doctor by suggesting she's unqualified. That kind of treatment is just wrong. I've been warned that I'll get that kind of treatment when I first start, but I guess it's going to be far worse for Clarissa and Sandy."

"There is quite a bit of sexism in medicine," Doctor Mercer allowed. "Surgery and trauma are the worst; pediatrics is probably the best."

"Not OB/GYN?" I asked.

"You would think, right? But that's a male-dominated specialty, and pretty much everything is dealt with from a man's point of view."

"Of all the stupid..."

"Yes," Doctor Mercer said, cutting me off. "and it's led to the overuse of sedation and anesthetics and a host of other things to manage..."

"'Hysterical' women," I said, completing the sentence she left hanging, "given the etymology of that word. And we could talk about the," I cleared my throat, "'treatments' for hysteria prescribed by the mental health community in the 19th century!"

"Exactly," she said with a soft laugh.

"I think that Resident is right," I said. "I'm going to speak with Father Stephen and arrange a time for us to visit Angie."

"Wearing your cassock might actually help."

"I can't do that without express permission from the bishop, and he's not likely to grant it for exactly the reason you are suggesting it. I'm a subdeacon, which is, in the words of the bishop, 'a glorified acolyte'. Even as a deacon, my pastoral care would be limited to, for example, bringing her reserved Eucharist if a priest were not available."

"Even if it would put her in a better frame of mind?"

"I strongly suspect His Grace would say 'no' simply because it WOULD engender that feeling in her. Let me call Father Stephen and make arrangements to see Angie tomorrow. He can bring her reserved Eucharist as well as anoint her with chrism. And he can ask her to take her medication. I'll simply be there. I will relay your suggestion about the cassock to him. And as I think about it, taking Elizaveta is the right course of action."

"You realize Angie might have an incident, right? What you call a meltdown. Can you handle that?"

"I handled the previous ones," I replied. "By offering my support and allowing her doctors to manage her condition."

"And Elizaveta?"

"You know how strong she is. She'll put on her 'Matushka' persona, and any reaction she has will come later after we leave the hospital."

"How sure are you about that? She's only fifteen."

"I'm positive. She's WAY more mature at fifteen than I was at twenty. Heck, in some ways, I'd say she's more mature than I am NOW."

Doctor Mercer laughed softly, "Not an uncommon situation for young men in college, though you seem to have managed to keep things relatively controlled."

"Relatively," I replied. "The problem is, the comparison you're making is to the ones who got out of control, not the ones who maintained it. I'm supposed to be the example of proper behavior, not the guy who wasn't as bad as he could have been."

"Fair enough. I'm not entirely comfortable with this, but it does have support from one of Angie's doctors. Let me also give you the number where you can reach Doctor Leslie Hoffmann, the Senior Resident. You should also speak with Angie's mom so you have her support."

"Could this get Doctor Hoffman in trouble?"

"If they think she orchestrated it, yes. But if you work through Angie's priest, I think Doctor Hoffman will weather the storm. And maybe it'll wake up the troglodytes!"

"Cave dwellers?" I chuckled.

"Yes, in more ways than one!"

"Are you referring to Plato's *Republic*?"

"Yes. In many ways, we're simply seeing the shadows on the wall, not reality."

"But in a sense, perception is reality, isn't it? That was part of what Plato was trying to say. Only when we can break free of the limit of our perception can we truly know anything. The Orthodox call that the «νοῦς» (*nous*) -- the 'eyes of the soul' -- which allow us to see our true reality."

"This is something we can explore when we have more time," Doctor Mercer replied. "I think it would be an interesting and enlightening conversation. Go ahead and call Angie's pastor and make the arrangements. Let me know, and if you do visit, I'd like to see you afterwards."

"Thanks. What's Doctor Hoffman's number?"

Doctor Mercer gave it to me, I repeated it back, and then we said 'goodbye'. I depressed the switchhook, then dialed the number.

"Doctor Hoffman," a woman with a distinct Southern accent answered.

"Hi, this is Michael Loucks. I'm a friend of Angie Stephens. Doctor Fran Mercer gave me your number."

"Hi. What can I do for you?"

"I understand from Doctor Mercer you disagreed with the Chief of Psychiatry on the best approach to helping Angie."

"I really can't go into that," she said.

"If you check, I strongly suspect her parents added me to the list of people with whom you could discuss Angie's treatment. If not, I'll call them and make those arrangements."

"They did, but I really can't discuss treatment options with you, only with the Attending. He's the one you would need to speak to."

"Not to be flip, but is that true if he's not listening to you because you're female? I happen to think you're right, and I want to come to see Angie, together with her

pastor and my fiancée. Angie knows I'm engaged, so that's not going to be news. What she needs to know is that my wedding is going to happen on May 26th. Period. End of sentence. If she has an incident, she's in the hospital where you are able to care for her. And you and I both know that incident WILL come, one way or the other. Doctor Mercer agrees, though I believe she's deferring to the medical doctors at this point, as she's a licensed clinical psychologist and Angie is in the hospital."

"You're a med student, right?"

"Soon to be. I was accepted to McKinley Medical School for the Fall term."

"And you're getting married beforehand? Talk about self-induced stress!"

I chuckled, "Or a way, sanctioned by my church, to work off some of that stress!"

Doctor Hoffman laughed, "Now that's funny!"

"It has something to recommend itself," I replied. "A friend of mine who was stressed out from college found it to be the perfect way to reduce her stress levels."

"And you didn't complain, I'm sure."

"In the immortal words of Sergeant Schultz, 'I know nothing!'. Anyway, I wanted to give you fair warning that there is a very good chance I'll visit tomorrow. I need to call Angie's priest and make the arrangements, but I'm sure he'll agree. Do you work tomorrow?"

"No, but I could trade shifts with another Resident who would be very happy to have a Saturday free."

"Would that cause you potential problems with the Chief Attending?"

"They'll suspect I orchestrated this no matter what."

"Are Angie's parents aware of the disagreement?"

"No, that was an internal discussion between the doctors here and Angie's outside doctors."

"OK. Then I think you'll have sufficient cover from Mr. and Mrs. Stephens and Father Stephen, her pastor. After all, you don't have my phone number, do you?"

"Why no, I don't!"

"And you haven't spoken with Angie's parents, have you?"

"I met them, but Doctor Bellows did all the talking."

"That's the Chief Attending?"

"Yes."

"Just like *I Dream of Jeannie*," I asked with a laugh.

"He's even from Florida," she replied. "The other Attendings and the nurses give him grief about it."

"OK. Let me make some calls. I'll call you before the end of the day."

"If I'm not here, just leave a message."

"Thanks."

We said 'goodbye', and I once again depressed the switchhook, and this time dialed Angie's house. Her mom answered, and I explained that I wanted to see Angie and that I felt a joint visit from Father Stephen and me, along with Elizaveta, might help bring Angie around. We discussed the fact that it might upset her, but her mom agreed that it was going to happen no matter what. That made me certain I was taking the right course of action, and once I finished speaking with Mrs. Stephens, I dialed the number for Saint George in Loveland. The church secretary put the call through to Father Stephen.

"Good morning, Subdeacon Michael."

"Good Morning, Father. I'm calling about Angie."

"I figured I'd hear from you by the weekend. Have you spoken to her doctors?"

"To Doctor Mercer, and, please do not repeat this anywhere, to Doctor Hoffman, the Resident, who disagrees with the Chief of Psychiatry on the best course of action."

"I picked up some tension between them, so that doesn't surprise me. And I'm guessing, given that you called me and you admitted speaking to her, that you agree with whatever it is that Doctor Hoffman is advocating."

"Ripping the bandage off in one swift motion," I said. "I spoke with Doctor Mercer about the two of us visiting Angie, and if I may suggest it, you bringing the reserved Eucharist and chrism to anoint her. Then you, Elizaveta, and I could visit with her for a bit and see if we can get her to agree to follow her treatment plan. You'd have to do most of the talking because I don't want to imply anything about any kind of future relationship that goes beyond a deep friendship. I hope I'm not overstepping."

"Advising the pastor on matters such as this is one of the most important duties of a deacon. In your case, you're going to have your medical training, in addition to the Holy Spirit, to draw upon. I believe your suggestion is a good one, and taking her Eucharist along with saying the prayers for anointing the sick is totally appropriate."

"Doctor Mercer suggested I wear my cassock, but I demurred because I think it sends the wrong message, not to mention I'd need permission from Vladyka ARKADY to wear my cassock outside my home parish. Well, unless the bishop is present in whatever church I'm attending."

"I do see your concern, but I wonder if that might not help Angie remember to whom your commitments have been made and to whom you have an obligation -- God and his Church, in the person of the bishop."

"But I can't give spiritual advice or even imply it."

"No, but you COULD assist me with the Eucharist and in anointing her. Let me call His Grace and get permission for you to wear your cassock and *orar*, which would match how I'll be dressed with my *ryassa* and *epitrachil*. What time did you want to meet?"

"Would 9:00am work for you?" I asked.

"Yes. Let me call His Grace and then the hospital to make the arrangements. You're aware she's in soft restraints?"

"I assumed," I sighed. "That's what they did with my friend Jocelyn when she was suicidal and fighting treatment."

"OK. I'll call you back once everything is arranged."

"Thanks, Father."

We said 'goodbye', and after depressing the switchhook once again, I dialed Doctor Mercer's office. When I was put through, I told her that I'd spoken to Angie's mom and to Father Stephen and that we planned to visit at 9:00am. She said she'd meet us at the hospital around 10:00am so that we could have coffee and talk. We said 'goodbye', and I went to find Clarissa and Jocelyn to fill them in.

That evening, when I picked up Elizaveta for our triple date with Clarissa, Abby, Jocelyn, and Gene, I let her know all the details about what had been worked out. We agreed I'd pick her up at 6:30am so we had time to have breakfast in Rutherford before driving to Cincinnati to see Angie.

L. An Offer

February 16, 1985, Greater Cincinnati, Ohio

"Good morning, Subdeacon," Father Stephen said when Elizaveta and I walked into the main lobby of The Christ Hospital in Cincinnati.

The hospital was on Mt. Auburn, one of the highest points in the city, and offered a nice view of the city below. Father Stephen was clad in his *ryassa*.

"Father, bless!" I said, holding my cupped hands for his blessing.

"Bless you, Subdeacon," he said, making the sign of the cross over my upturned palms.

I kissed his hand, and then Elizaveta received his blessing as well.

"Go ahead and put on your cassock and *orar*, and we'll go up to the ward."

I set down my bag, unzipped it, and took out my cassock. I put it on, buttoned the two neck buttons and the two buttons at the base of my rib cage, then tied the cord around my waist. I took my gold *orar* from the bag, held it for Father to bless, kissed his hand once again, and then wrapped it around me, crossing it in the front. When I finished, we made our way to the elevator and went up to the psychiatric ward.

The ward was locked, and there was a nurse behind a Plexiglass window who asked us who we were visiting.

"Angela Stephens," Father Stephen said. "I'm her pastor, Father Stephen, and this is Subdeacon Michael, who is also clergy, and Matushka Elizaveta."

That was a bit of a stretch because she wasn't technically, but I understood his point. Elizaveta smiled broadly, and I felt her hand touch mine and then squeeze.

"Doctor Hoffman notified us you'd be coming. I'm going to buzz you through and call her. Please wait just inside the door, and she'll take you to Angela."

"Thank you."

A buzzer sounded and Father Stephen pushed open the door, and the three of us went inside. A moment later, a pretty blonde doctor walked over to us.

"Doctor Hoffman," Father Stephen said. "I believe you spoke to Subdeacon Michael on the phone. And this is his fiancée, Elizaveta."

"Hi!" Doctor Hoffman replied.

"Good morning," I said with a smile.

"Hi!" Elizaveta exclaimed.

"We were able to remove Angie's restraints this morning, so she's in the common room right now," Doctor Hoffman said in a wonderful Southern accent. "We'll bring her into the larger consultation room so you can have some privacy for your religious rites."

"That's actually up to Angela," Father Stephen said. "But if it's going to be disruptive to other patients, we can do that."

"No. The patients who are here are neither violent nor aggressive, so it wouldn't be an issue. Let me go ask her. Please wait here."

She left and was back a moment later to lead us to the common room where Angie was sitting. She was wearing sweatpants, a sweatshirt, and slip-on deck shoes rather than a hospital gown, but as with the previous time I'd seen her when she was medicated, her normally shiny red hair was dull, her complexion was even more pallid than normal, and her eyes somewhat vacant. I felt like crying, but I knew that wouldn't help.

"Hi, Ang," I said.

She looked up and saw me and smiled but then caught a glimpse of Elizaveta, and her smile turned to a frown.

"Hi," she replied dully.

"Good morning, Angela," Father Stephen said.

"Father, bless," she replied slowly.

She held her hands up, he gave a blessing, and she kissed his hand.

"Would you like to receive the Eucharist?" he asked.

Angie nodded, so Father Stephen removed the gilded box he was wearing around his neck and set it on the table. He took a candle from his bag and handed it and a lighter to me. I lit the candle and held it while he opened the box and removed a tiny chalice, a small container with the reserved Eucharist, and a small vial of wine. He opened the container and, using tweezers, took one particle of the reserved Eucharist and placed it in the chalice. He then opened the vial of wine, said a quiet prayer, and poured the wine into the chalice. After it sat

for a moment so that the dried Eucharist had softened, he picked up the small chalice.

"The Handmaiden of God, Angela, receives the Body and Blood of Christ for forgiveness of sins and unto life everlasting."

"Amen," Angie said quietly.

Father Stephen held the chalice to Angie's lips, she tilted her head back, and he poured the Eucharist from the chalice into her mouth. When the chalice was empty, he used a cloth from the box to wipe it clean, then placed everything back into the box. The cloth would need to be hand washed just like the communion cloths we used at church, and the water used to wash it poured into the garden to ensure that none of the Eucharist was flushed into the sewers.

Next, Father Stephen took a small vial of chrism from the gold box and a small paper bag with a Q-tip from his bag. He opened the vial, removed the Q-tip from the bag, and used it to apply chrism to Angie's forehead, chin, and the backs of her hands.

"The Handmaiden of God, Angela, is anointed for the healing of soul and body," he said.

When he finished, he carefully wrapped the Q-tip in a paper towel and put it back into the paper bag. Someone would burn it using a barbecue grill at church to ensure that the chrism did not find its way into the trash. The ashes would be spread in a small pit used for anything which needed to be disposed of but which couldn't be thrown into the trash because it had been blessed in some way. I blew out the candle and handed it back to Father Stephen, who held it until the wax dried.

"Ang," I said as gently as I could, "why won't you take your medication?"

"I don't want to," she said slowly, struggling with her words. "It makes me like this."

"But if you take it, they'll reduce the dose, just like last time," I countered. "Then you can go to work and school."

"Don't want to," she said. "Can't be...me. Can't be...with you."

Angie's words were like a punch in the gut, and I struggled to keep my composure. A few deep breaths allowed me to maintain emotional control, and then I looked over at Doctor Hoffman, who nodded, agreeing I needed to say what we'd discussed. I hated having to say it, but I didn't see any other option.

"Ang," I said gently, "Elizaveta and I are going to marry at the end of May, as we planned. Even if that weren't the case, Ohio won't let you get married."

Tears began flowing down her face, and she pulled her legs up onto the couch, wrapped her arms around them, and began rocking. I felt a hand on my arm and turned to see Doctor Hoffman, who used her head to indicate we should step away.

"You should probably leave," she said quietly. "Angie can't hear you now, and I need to have the orderlies take her back to her room."

"Catatonic?" I asked.

"Not quite, but this is what she does when she withdraws and refuses to talk or listen. It's the response we get when we try to do any kind of counseling. A stronger dose of antipsychotics would prevent it, but then she won't be lucid at all."

"Lord, have mercy," I said quietly.

"She didn't lash out, which is a good sign," Doctor Hoffman said. "But I have a strong suspicion she'll fight us when the time comes for her medication, and we'll need to restrain and sedate her again."

"«Говно» (*gavno*)," I said reflexively.

"Russian?" Doctor Hoffman asked.

"Yes. It means 'shit', but I really didn't want to say that in front of you."

Doctor Hoffman laughed softly, "I've heard far worse! May I ask if you've decided on a specialty?"

"Emergency medicine," I replied. "What's your next step with Angie?"

"To try to wean her from the drugs, but if she fights us, we can't really make any progress. Wait here a moment, OK?"

"Sure."

She went to call the orderlies, and Elizaveta came to stand next to me.

"Hi, Matushka," I said quietly.

Elizaveta laughed softly, "I like it! Now, if it were only REALLY true!"

"Soon enough! And you won't be able to get rid of me!"

"As if I would want that!" she replied, but then became serious, "What happens now?"

"They'll take her to her room and continue to treat her. Unfortunately, what happens now is up to her, but she's not in any condition to act rationally. I'm at a loss, and I honestly believe the doctors are as well. There's a good chance she'll be medicated like this for a long time, maybe even forever."

"It's really scary," Elizaveta said. "Mr. Dubrovskiy lost his leg in Viet Nam, and Mrs. Gurchenko is blind, but they can live pretty normal lives. Angie is healthy, right?"

"Physically? Yes."

"Scary," Elizaveta said soberly.

"I agree."

Doctor Hoffman came back, and I watched as two orderlies moved Angie to a wheelchair. One of them pushed it out of the common room and down the hall, and Father Stephen walked over to join Doctor Hoffman, Elizaveta, and me.

"Is there anything that can be done?" he asked.

Doctor Hoffman shook her head, "All we can do is work with her and try to get her past her desire to, uhm..."

"It's OK, Doctor," Elizaveta said. "I know all about Mike and Angie. I know she was the girl he most likely would have married, but nobody can do anything about what happened."

"How old are you, if I may ask."

"Fifteen. I turn sixteen in April, and we'll marry at the end of May after Mike graduates from Taft."

Doctor Hoffman looked at me, rolled her eyes slightly, but said nothing.

"Is it OK if I call you to check on Angie, Doctor Hoffman?"

"Yes."

"And let me know if you get into any trouble," I said. "I'll be happy to tell your Attending that I made this happen after talking to Angie's parents."

"Thanks, but I think things will be OK."

"If you think visiting her will do any good, please let me know. Father," I said, turning to him, "will you make regular pastoral visits?"

"That is my intent. I'll call her parents later this morning. You're meeting with Doctor Mercer when you leave?"

"Yes. She'll be downstairs. We'll probably just go to the cafeteria for coffee."

"OK."

I asked for his blessing to remove my *orar*, and once he'd given the blessing, I removed the *orar* and my cassock and put them both into my bag. Elizaveta and I asked for his blessing, which he gave, and then we left the psychiatric ward. We got into the elevator and rode down to the lobby, where we sat down to wait for Doctor Mercer, who arrived about twenty minutes later. The three of us went to the cafeteria, and Doctor Mercer bought coffee for the three of us.

"How is she?" Doctor Mercer asked when we sat down at a table in the corner of the room, away from most people.

"She smiled when she first saw me, but that turned to a frown as soon as she saw Elizaveta. Father Stephen served her the Eucharist and anointed her. I asked her about her medication, and she said it makes her not herself and makes it so she can't be with me. Then, with Doctor Hoffman's blessing, I reminded Angie about my upcoming wedding to Elizaveta. At that point, Angie basically curled up in a ball and cried. Doctor Hoffman had orderlies take her back to her room. Doctor Hoffman believes Angie will fight them over the drugs."

"I expect her to," Doctor Mercer said. "But she was so hysterical that we didn't really have a choice. They'll do their best to wean her off the antipsychotics, but if she fights them, that makes it difficult."

"Why not just stop the drugs and see what happens?" I asked.

"That is an option, but it's not one that is likely to be considered because she needs the antidepressants to stay stable."

"So just stop the antipsychotics," I said. "Maybe negotiate with her."

"That's a bad idea," Doctor Mercer replied gently, "because we can't really negotiate away possible treatment options. If we committed to that, and she needed them, there would be a serious ethical problem. Not to mention, patients often don't know what's best for them. You're going to discover that on the very first day of your very first clinical rotation. You'll find out soon enough that patients decide they know better and will take less or more of a drug than prescribed, often with very bad effects. One good example is that patients often stop taking antibiotics before they finish the course of treatment. That leads to resistant strains of bacteria. I'm no expert in that area, but I'm sure you've had that mentioned in class, at least."

"MRSA," I replied. "Discovered in England in the 1960s. And there was an outbreak in Detroit among IV drug users a few years ago, according to my biochemistry professor."

"The situation is analogous -- if we negotiate away the antipsychotics, then her psychosis could continue unabated, feeding on itself."

"Sorry, I didn't think that through."

Doctor Mercer smiled, "It's OK. You'll learn these things once you get into your clinical rotations. Keep an eye out, and you'll learn to judge if the man on your exam table really does have back pain or if he's drug-seeking. You won't always get it right, but you'll develop a sense for who is telling the truth and who isn't."

"But there is no test for that, right? I mean, we can't measure pain; the patient can only tell us how they feel."

"That's true, but you can look for other signs and ask them or their loved ones questions about their daily activities and what makes the pain worse. We don't need to get into the details; you just need to be aware of the concept. Your professors and mentors will teach you. When you have your elective rotations, may I suggest you do a double psych rotation? One adult and one adolescent? I think it'll pay big dividends in the ER."

"So what do I do now?" I asked.

"At this point, just wait. Let her doctors work with her and let her pastor provide whatever spiritual help he is able to provide."

"How are you involved with her treatment here?"

"She's under inpatient psychiatric care, so while they'll consult with me, it's up to the doctors here to determine the best course of action."

"And her psychiatrist?"

"Has admitting privileges here, so he's more directly involved. Once she's at a point where she's home again, if she can go home again, then I'll be able to work with her."

"I thought you were a doctor," Elizaveta said.

"I am, but not a medical doctor. I have a PhD in psychology. A psychiatrist is an MD who specializes in mental illness. The main difference is that I'm not permitted to prescribe drugs. There are also slightly different rules with regard to what tests I can perform, but the practical difference really is the ability to write prescriptions. I started working with Angie before we knew she had a condition which would require medication."

"What causes something like this?"

"We don't know," Doctor Mercer replied. "And I'm sure Mike has told you there is no known cure."

"He did, and it's really scary because it could happen to anyone!"

"That's true, but it's also not common enough for you to worry about. Is there anything else I can help either of you with?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Elizaveta and I were going to go to the Cincinnati Nature Center and walk around, then have lunch before we head back to McKinley. I'll call Doctor Hoffman during the week to check on Angie. If you hear anything, will you call me?"

"Yes, of course. I assume you'll keep in touch with Father Stephen as well?"

"I will."

We finished our coffee, then Elizaveta and I said 'goodbye' to Doctor Mercer and headed out to my Mustang. We got in, fastened our seat belts, and headed for Route 50, which would take us to Clermont County, where the Nature Center was located.

"You looked like you were going to cry when Angie said she couldn't be with you," Elizaveta said.

"That's because I almost did," I replied. "I can't even imagine what it felt like for her to hear me say what I said after that."

"Because you'd rather be with her?" Elizaveta asked, her voice soft and trembling.

I took a slow, deep breath and let it out before answering.

"That's not really a fair question, and I don't know how to answer it," I said carefully. "I care a great deal for Angie, but we were never a couple, and she was never in a mental state where we could be a couple. According to Doctor Mercer, nobody can be sure how much of our relationship was a product of Angie's illness; it's possible all of it was."

"But you were in love with her, weren't you?"

"Yes. But the Angie I was in love with doesn't exist, and I doubt that Angie ever existed."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said before -- nobody knows how much of our relationship, or how much of Angie's personality, was a product of her illness. In a sense, it would be like falling in love with an actress based on a role she played in a movie. You have no idea if she's even anything like her role in reality. So what I'm saying, I guess, is I can't answer the question except to say I want to marry you and spend my life with you, and I mean that. I want you to be my wife and the mother of my children."

"You're sure?"

"Positive! If I didn't want to be with you, I wouldn't have agreed to marry you and would have put off my ordination. I care about Angie a lot, but I want to marry YOU. And nothing is going to change that."

She put her hand lightly over mine, which was on the stick shift, and we drove on in silence, with just the hum of the tires, the growl of the motor, and the soft music of Q-102 floating from the speakers.



February 17, 1985, The Sunday of the Last Judgment (Meatfare Sunday). McKinley, Ohio

"Good morning, Subdeacon!" Father Nicholas said when I arrived at the church on Sunday morning.

"Father, bless!" I replied.

I received his blessing and kissed his hand.

"I spoke with Mark and Alyssa at length last night. They made a very strong request to have you and Elizaveta as their godparents, but I have some serious concerns about the amount of time you're going to have available. You're getting married, you're being ordained, and you're starting medical school. Your ages were a consideration but not the deciding factor. In other circumstances, say, if you were graduating and taking a job and not being ordained, I'd have probably acceded to their request."

"Who did you suggest as alternatives?"

"Your alternative choice was excellent, and I approved. I called Doctor Evgeni last night, and he and Maria agreed to serve as Mark and Alyssa's godparents."

I nodded, "That makes sense, and I agree it's the right decision. How did Mark and Alyssa respond?"

"They weren't surprised based on your conversation, though they were disappointed."

"If Tasha is amenable, I'll invite them to join us on Sundays. That'll keep the relationship going."

Father Nicholas nodded, "A good idea."

"Who did Alyssa choose for a patron?"

"After some discussion, she chose 'Photini'. I do want to say that you've done a great job catechizing them so far."

"Thanks."

"Shall we begin our preparations?"

"Yes, Father."

Just over four hours later, Elizaveta and I joined Mark, Alyssa, and Alyssa's parents at their table in the church hall, and after our light meal, I taught Sunday school to the teens and college students. After Sunday school, Elizaveta and I headed to Tasha's apartment for our usual afternoon with Tasha and Nik. Tasha made tea, and the four of us sat down around the dinette table.

"I'd like to ask Mark and Alyssa to join us," I said. "They wanted Elizaveta and me to be their godparents, but Father Nicholas felt we had a bit too much on our plate. This way, though, we can maintain a close relationship."

"Are they engaged?" Tasha asked.

"I think it's only a matter of time, really. They've been dating for several years, and they're both going to Taft. They've talked about marriage, though not seriously. I think that question will become more serious once they graduate."

"Sure, they can join us," Tasha said. "I think it's good for the young couples to hang out together. What do you think about trying to get someone from your Sunday School class onto the Parish Council?"

"Anyone who is eighteen and has been Orthodox at least two years is permitted to be on the ballot. It's simply a matter of three people nominating them and Father Nicholas agreeing there are no impediments to them serving. Remember, I get an automatic seat, even if I don't want it!"

"But you're clergy, well, you will be, so that's different. Basically, you have no choice but to vote whichever way the bishop says!"

"Not true," I protested. "I'm free to vote as I choose. Neither liturgics nor pastoral issues come before the Parish Council because those issues are the purview of the bishop and the priest."

"But you would never oppose Vladyka ARKADY!" Tasha protested.

"And he would never IMPOSE! I've not heard of a single time when the bishop forced a parish to do anything, and he's been my bishop since I was a toddler. Has your dad ever complained?"

"Only about de-Russification."

"He would," I chuckled. "But he's on the 'wrong side of history' as they say in that regard. The Orthodox Church has always adopted the language of the people wherever it has spread. They use Japanese at the Cathedral in Tokyo, Arabic at the Cathedral in Damascus, and so on. And you know this jurisdictional mess cannot stand long-term if the church is to be a proper witness. Our bishops need to get their collective butts in gear, ignore the people who demand ethnic churches, and forge an American church and an American patriarchate. We'll be out of communion with the rest of the world for a time, but that, too, is normal. We're technically not in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the moment."

"Why?" Nik asked.

"Because the Ecumenical Patriarch didn't accept our autocephaly. He ignored the fact that we were the original jurisdiction as the Russian Metropolia before we were granted autocephaly in 1970 and became the OCA. If we form our own synod, the Patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Moscow will have a snit about it as well, which is, sad to say, traditional when national churches break away from the mother church in terms of administration."

"Do you think that will happen?" he asked.

"Our bishops need to talk to each other in a serious way. SCOBA was a good idea, but it's not working out in the way it should have. It's been twenty-five years, and there really hasn't been any serious movement. Part of that is because the Moscow Patriarchate is under the thumb of the Communists, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is under the thumb of the Turkish government, and the Antiochian Patriarchate is under the thumb of the Syrian government. Add in the 'Old Country' people who move here from Greece or the Middle East who want their services in Greek or Arabic, plus the people like Tasha's dad, and you have a situation where the bishops are reluctant to act for fear of creating an uproar. But that would die down quickly if all the American bishops were in agreement. They aren't, and each for their own reasons."

"Arguing over who would be in charge?" Tasha asked.

"Yes, because there are more Greeks; more than 150,000 Greeks emigrated in the late 60s and the 70s, and the EP doesn't want to give up the income he gets from the Greek Americans. But that could be solved if the American bishops put their minds to it."

"You're criticizing the bishops?" Elizaveta asked. "Is that wise?"

"As Vladyka ARKADY would say, I'm entitled to my private opinions. I would never speak quite so plainly in public, but the four of us are close friends, and I trust you to keep this private. That said, there is no prohibition on talking about history. None of it is secret, and Father Herman and I talked about it while I was in High School. The only thing I'd have to change is how I presented the intransigence of the 'Old World' bishops and the pro-ethnic bishops here."

"So, back to someone younger on the Parish Council?" Tasha asked.

"You mean you?" I asked with a grin.

"No, but I would, and I know a few others would as well."

"Then decide amongst yourselves and nominate someone. If all the young adults vote for their candidate, there's a good chance they'll get in."

"We'll talk about it. If I can change the subject, how is Angie?"

"Not good," I replied. "She's not cooperating with her treatment plan, and that makes things significantly worse. She had to be admitted to the psychiatric ward at The Christ Hospital in Cincinnati. Elizaveta and I went to see her yesterday."

"Why would she not cooperate, if I'm allowed to ask?" Nik inquired.

"Psychoactive drugs tend to have serious side effects and make it difficult to do much of anything that requires thinking."

"That almost seems counterproductive," he protested.

"I agree," I said, "but I don't know enough to be in a position to disagree with her doctors, and I trust her psychologist. But a psychologist isn't a medical doctor and can't prescribe drugs, so Angie has a psychiatrist as well."

"How are your wedding plans coming along, Tasha?" Elizaveta asked.

"Just fine. Father Nicholas and Father Herman are going to concelebrate. There was a bit of debate about where to hold the wedding, but I want it at Saint Michael because it's my parish now, and we do have a bigger parish hall than Holy Transfiguration. My godmother disagreed."

"And you went against her?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"This is MY wedding, not hers!" Tasha declared firmly. "So we'll do it MY way!"

"Touchy, touchy!" I teased. "The traditional meal in the church hall?"

"Yes, of course."

"How is your job search going, Nik?" I asked.

"I've had one interview with an architecture firm in Columbus, and I have an interview scheduled for next month with General Electric in Cincinnati. I also sent applications to some smaller manufacturing companies and other architectural firms. And I have on-campus interviews arranged for next month as well for companies who are recruiting."

"How did the interview in Columbus go?"

"I thought it went well, but it was my first ever real job interview, so I'm not sure."

"Will you two go back to Holy Transfiguration if you get a job in Cincinnati or Dayton?" Elizaveta asked.

"Most likely, yes," Tasha replied, "as we'll probably live in Rutherford."

"I hope that doesn't happen," Elizaveta said. "I like the small group we're forming here."

"We do, too," Tasha replied. "Nik would prefer a job in Columbus."

"What about McKinley?" Elizaveta asked.

"There really isn't anything for me here in McKinley," Nik replied. "There is one manufacturing firm that has a couple of mechanical engineers, but they don't have any openings."

"What are Mark and Alyssa going to study?" Tasha asked.

"Physics for him; psychology for her," I replied.

We finished our tea, and then Elizaveta and Tasha got up and baked fresh bread and then prepared a meal. After dinner, I took Elizaveta home and then returned to campus. Once there, I spent three hours working on my first paper for Abnormal Psych, then relaxed with the gang in my room.

"When do you have time to practice for our concert?" José asked.

"Tuesday or Thursday afternoon before 4:00pm would work best for me," I said.

"How about Thursday, right after lunch?"

That meant I'd have to skip a balalaika lesson, but I was making enough progress that it wouldn't hurt to miss one lesson.

"Sounds good."

"I met a couple of Freshmen who play drums and keyboard," he continued. "I wondered if you'd consider playing together sometime?"

"You should, Mike," Clarissa interjected before I could answer. "Music relaxes you, and you are going to need some kind of stress relief."

"Practice time is the concern," I replied.

"But if I play lead, you play rhythm, and I find someone who plays bass, you won't actually have to practice as much. You'd sing, of course, and I'd do backup vocals. The keyboard player can sing about as well as I can. The drummer is hopeless!"

I chuckled, "Most of them are! Let me think about it, OK?"

"Mike, do it!" Jos insisted.

"I agree," Robby added.

"I think you're seriously outvoted here," Clarissa said with a smirk.

"And let me guess, you all knew about this before he said anything, right?"

"Who? Us?" Clarissa asked with a silly smile.

"Yes, you! Let me think about it. And I won't have any idea how much free time I'm going to have until school starts in August."

"Do you have a name picked out?" Dona asked.

"I was thinking 'Trauma Team'," José said. "Or maybe 'Red Blanket'. Or 'Code Blue'."

"I'm thinking 'Medical Waste!'" Jocelyn teased.

"Or 'Bad Reaction!'" José snickered.

"Very funny!" I replied.

"I can think of better ones!" Jocelyn declared.

"No, you can't! And you won't try because you love me!"

"I do love you, and that's why I tease you!"

"I'd say you two should get a room, but a feisty little Russian girl will put you both in the ground!" Sophia said, causing everyone to laugh.

"Ain't THAT the truth!" I replied, causing everyone to laugh even harder.



February 19, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday evening, I met my future father-in-law at the Country Club for dinner.

"What would you think of having someone from my Sunday School class on the Parish Council?" I asked.

"I've tried for years," Viktor said, shaking his head. "None of them are ever interested, nor are they willing to put in the time."

"I think you may find that there is a change of attitude; Natalya Vasilyevna expressed interest, and she said Nikolas Dmitriyevich is interested as well. How do you think they would be received?"

He smiled, "There are a few of the older generation who wouldn't be comfortable, but most others would, especially with Tasha, given she's the daughter of a deacon. Nikolas is also well-regarded as a mature, intelligent young man. The concern I have is that Nikolas is looking for a job which might take him away from Saint Michael the Archangel."

"I believe he'd prefer to take a job in Columbus and live someplace like Circleville so they could continue attending our parish. He's looked in McKinley but hasn't found anyone with openings."

"There aren't too many opportunities for a mechanical engineer here in McKinley. Do you know where he's applied?"

"A number of architectural and engineering firms in Columbus as well as General Electric in Cincinnati. He had an interview with an architectural firm in Columbus that he thinks went well."

"I wish there was an opportunity for him here in McKinley. I really hate the idea of our young people moving away to find jobs."

"You know, I never asked, but where are your other businesses?"

"The computer stores are in Cincinnati and Columbus, the hardware store is near Toledo, and the electrical supply and plumbing supply companies are in Youngstown. My headquarters, such as it is, is here in McKinley. But it's just me, an assistant, a secretary, and an accountant. Each business has its own general manager who reports to me and my assistant, and my accountant does consolidated books."

"How will Gennady fit in?"

"Eventually, he'll take over for me, but at first, he'll learn the ropes at each of the companies. He's going to start at the dealership, assisting the sales manager."

"What about his fiancée?" I asked.

"She'll look for a secretarial position here in McKinley, but relatively short-term, because they plan to start a family right away."

"How old is she?" I asked.

"Twenty. She'll be twenty-one in October, right before they marry. How are things with you?"

"School is just fine, and I believe your mom and mother-in-law have the wedding reception well in hand. Things are OK at home, and my sister and her husband are doing well."

"Elizaveta said that your friend has been hospitalized."

"Unfortunately, yes. Hopefully, they can help her."

"Is there anything at all you need from me?"

I shook my head, "Not that I can think of. Right now, it's just a matter of finishing the semester, attending graduation, and showing up for the wedding!"

"I believe Elizaveta will ensure that happens!"

"My life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel if I didn't! I'd have better luck with «спецназ» (*Spetsnaz*) than with her! Not that I have any intention of finding out."
("Russian Special Forces")

We both laughed together and just then, the waiter brought our meals. We ate, then I headed back to campus to study with the gang.



February 20, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Mike, Chancellor Evans would like to see you," Doctor Norris said to me when I arrived at the Biology Department lunch at noon on Wednesday.

"About?" I asked.

"He'll explain. Your last class ends at 3:00pm, correct?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you can be in his office at 3:30pm."

"I can."

I went to sit next to Clarissa and Lee and helped myself to a sub sandwich with lettuce, tomato, and triple cheese, specially ordered for me because I needed to avoid eating meat until Pascha.

"The Chancellor wants to see me," I said.

"About what?"

"Doctor Norris didn't say."

"You haven't done anything! And everyone loves you!"

"Don't read anything into it, Mike," Lee said.

"I'm not; I'm just curious. If Dean 'You Know Who' was still here, then I might worry."

"I keep hearing rumors she's coming back once you graduate," Sophia, who was sitting to Lee's left, said.

"I don't understand why they would do that, and nothing personal, but I won't be here next year."

"Eh, we have one year to go," Lee said. "How much damage could she do?"

"Don't ask!" Clarissa replied.

After lunch, we had our biology stats class and our Russian literature class. After class, I dropped my books at the dorm and then headed to the Administration building for my meeting with Chancellor Evans. I was a few minutes early, so I had to wait for Chancellor Evans to finish his previous meeting, which ran a few minutes long.

"Mike, sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "Step in, please."

"Good afternoon; and it's no trouble," I replied.

I went into his office and sat down in the chair he indicated.

"Mike, the Academic Committee met to discuss the valedictory speaker and unanimously agreed that we'd like you to give that speech."

"Me?!" I asked, completely surprised.

"You were jointly nominated by Doctor Blahnik, Dean Anderson, Doctor Norris, and Doctor Alvis. And as I said, the committee voted unanimously. Will you do it?"

"I'm not really big on speaking in public."

"Unofficially, I was at the debate you had with the pastor, and I think you did an excellent job. I've been to your concerts. You did a great job with those as well."

"Unofficially?"

"I couldn't be there in an official capacity because this is a State school, and to be frank, I'm an atheist. But that doesn't mean I didn't appreciate your speaking skills. And your patter during your concerts has been excellent. So, I'm not quite sure what you mean by not being 'big' on speaking in public."

"I don't like it," I replied. "Being the center of attention is not my thing."

"Actually, it IS your thing. You're good at it. Embrace it."

"Do you need an answer right now?"

"Technically, no, but we chose you, Mike, because we want you, and we think you are the best representative of the graduating class."

"And if I decline?"

"Given the vote was unanimous, we'd have to go back to the nominations and begin again."

"Then," I said reluctantly, "I'll do it."

LI. Que sera, sera?

February 20, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Are there any guidelines?" I asked Chancellor Evans.

"You have quite a bit of leeway, but your speech does need to be approved. If you could have it to me by the first week in May, that'll give you plenty of time to write it and still leave time for review and any changes that might be appropriate."

"How long should it be?"

"According to tradition?" he asked with a slight smile. "Or, according to the students?"

"Tradition, I suppose," I replied with a smile of my own.

"Typically between ten and twelve minutes. During my tenure, the shortest one was about seven minutes, and the longest, twenty. I'd avoid that, if you can."

"I think I can say whatever it is I decide I need to say in ten minutes or so," I said, smiling. "Are there any restrictions about me referring to my faith?"

"No, though I would remind you that you're speaking for the entire student body."

I nodded, "OK. Who is giving the commencement speech?"

"It hasn't been formally announced, but former Senator Robert Taft, Jr., the grandson of William Howard Taft. He's the first member of the Taft family to speak here since his father spoke here in 1950."

"When will you make the announcement?"

"Tomorrow."

"May I tell a couple of friends, who I am sure will keep quiet?"

"If you're absolutely sure, yes."

I nodded, "I am. May I ask an unrelated question?"

"Sure."

"There are rumors that Dean Parker is going to return next year. Is there any truth to those rumors?"

"If she is, it's news to me," Chancellor Evans replied. "There are no faculty or administration positions open for the Fall, with the exception of a tenure track position in the History Department and a lecturer's position in the Math Department. My turn for an unrelated question, if I may?"

"Sure."

"I hear you're getting married right after graduation."

"That's true."

"And you'll be ordained as a deacon at the end of the Summer?"

"Also true."

"Do you intend to go on to be a priest?"

I shook my head, "No. That's not my calling, nor is it really compatible with being a doctor."

"Why is that?"

"Any involvement with a death creates a potential problem for a priest or a bishop, even if it's unintentional or an accident. It's a very old tradition in the church. It wouldn't be much of a risk if I was planning to be a GP, but I intend to be an emergency medicine specialist."

"I won't try to figure that one out. My parents were never church-goers, and my knowledge of theology is limited to one course in world religions as an undergrad more than thirty years ago."

"Both ceremonies are open to the public, as it were. The wedding ceremony is actually quite brief, as we basically did half of it when we were betrothed. The ordination, on the other hand, is part of the Sunday liturgical services, so it would be about four hours."

"I'm curious, but I don't think I'm that curious!"

"Well, if you change your mind, the ordination service is on July 28th and starts at about 8:30am with Matins. The wedding ceremony is on May 26th and starts at about 2:00pm. It'll be finished by 2:30pm at the latest. There will be coffee and snacks afterwards at the church. And neither of those require an RSVP."

"We'll see where my curiosity takes me. Let me know if you have any questions about your speech."

"I will. And thank you very much for the honor."

"It's well deserved, Mike. You'll graduate summa cum laude from the Honors program, were invited to the biology department lunches for their top students, have been a very effective Resident Advisor, have helped with student orientation and campus tours, and you've shown very good character. In addition, you demonstrated your public speaking skills; you're articulate and know how to work a room."

I couldn't help but laugh and shake my head.

"And if you had suggested this four years ago when I came to Taft..."

"Then we've done our job!"

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome!"

Chancellor Evans stood and extended his hand. I stood, shook his hand, and bade him 'goodbye'. I headed back to the dorm, where most of the gang was waiting. I couldn't really tell anyone except Clarissa and Jocelyn, so I needed to obfuscate.

"What was it about?" Lee asked.

"He wanted to ask me a few questions. I can't really say what about, but I'm not in any trouble, nor are any of you. I did ask him about the rumors saying that Dean Parker is coming back, and he says that if it's true, it's news to him and that there are no openings for her."

"That's GREAT news!" Sophia declared. "The last thing we need during Senior year is someone like her, making things even more difficult than they already are!"

"She was that bad?" Lara asked.

"You have NO idea!" Melody said. "Dean Anderson is totally cool; Dean Parker was the spawn of Satan! If she had her way, we'd have sex-segregated dorms and no visitors of the opposite sex. To 'protect' the women, you know."

"And who would protect US from the aggressive women?" I asked with a smirk.

"Molest me! Please?" José requested, laughing.

"Later!" Dona interjected, but she was laughing as well. "Behave now!"

"I suppose," José said with a theatrical sigh.

We hung out until dinner, but I couldn't eat because I wanted to receive the Eucharist. When everyone else went to dinner, I headed to church for the Vesperal Divine Liturgy. Father Nicholas was one of the people I knew I could trust with my announcement, but I knew that if I didn't tell Elizaveta first, she'd feel slighted, and rightly so. I took her aside after the service.

"I need to tell you something, but you can't repeat it before Friday. OK?"

"Of course! You know I'll do that!"

"I do. I was asked to give the graduation valedictory speech."

"Wow!" Elizaveta exclaimed. "That's a great honor, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm proud of you, Mike!"

"Thanks. You're the first person I told."

"Not Clarissa?" she asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No, not Clarissa. You."

She smiled broadly, and I was VERY happy that circumstances had allowed me to learn something VERY important without suffering the wrath of my soon-to-be wife. If I had something important to share, I had to share it with Elizaveta first. We couldn't hug because I was wearing my cassock, so I said goodnight, then let Father Nicholas know. After I'd spoken to him, I went out to my car and saw Elizaveta standing by the driver's door.

"Hi," I said.

"Take off your cassock so I can kiss you! Then you can take me home."

I nodded, removed the cassock and put it in its bag in the trunk, then turned to Elizaveta who gave me a very sexy kiss and a tight hug. When we broke the kiss, I helped her into the car, then drove her home, where I received another very nice kiss before I headed back to campus. Once there, I spent a couple of hours working on my paper for my Abnormal Psych class, using Angie's situation as the basis for the paper but without using her name. At about 11:00pm, Clarissa and Jocelyn came to my room.

"I can tell you what the Chancellor wanted," I said. "But nothing can be said before the official announcement tomorrow. I know I can count on you two."

"Of course!" Clarissa said.

"Obviously," Jocelyn agreed.

"Chancellor Evans asked me to give the valedictory speech at graduation, and I agreed."

Jocelyn stared at me, her mouth open, looking stunned. It took her a dozen seconds to regain her composure.

"Mike Loucks? Willingly giving a public speech? I've entered some kind of alternate universe!"

"He's not the same guy you grew up with," Clarissa said. "This Mike is ready to be a doctor, deacon, husband, and father."

"You've done a good job helping him," Jocelyn said.

"Not just me," Clarissa replied. "All of his friends here, including you."

"After I messed him up," Jocelyn sighed.

"No, you didn't," I declared firmly. "I messed myself up. I'm responsible for my own actions, and I made a complete mess of our relationship because I was too weak to handle it."

"But..."

I shook my head and held up my hand, "I wasn't ready for the relationship we needed to have at fourteen and would likely have messed up just as badly, if not worse."

"But if I had stayed, instead of deciding to go to Purdue..."

"Then I would have been the same Mike, with no real changes other than not being a virgin. And that would have been MY fault, not yours. Look, I'm not fatalistic, saying all of this stuff was ordained to happen, nor do I believe 'everything happens for a reason'. As the song says, *'whatever will be, will be; the future's not ours to see'*, or, if you prefer, in Scriptural terms, *'Do not worry about tomorrow, each day has enough trouble of its own'*."

"What I'm saying is that all we can do, or will be able to do, is take each day as it comes, deal with whatever challenges or opportunities it presents, and move forward towards our goals. That is literally all we can do. Worrying about what might happen tomorrow is a useless pursuit because you don't know what will happen tomorrow. I'm not saying we should move forward blindly or fail to prepare, but worrying about it won't change anything. *Que Sera, Sera.*"

"That makes no sense!" Jocelyn protested. "Actions have consequences!"

"Yes, they do, but do we know what those will be with certainty? Did you know all the events which would occur once we made our decision to go to Cincinnati? I sure as heck didn't!"

"No," Jocelyn sighed. "Obviously."

"Which makes two of us," I replied.

"And the proof of both your characters," Clarissa said, "is that you overcame everything that happened and are going to live your lives the way you had planned for the dozen years before you graduated from High School! You guys just took a detour through wild, uninhibited, immensely pleasurable sex!"

"Mike Loucks!" Jocelyn protested.

"What?" I asked innocently because I was, in fact, innocent.

"Jocelyn," Clarissa smirked, "YOU told me that when we talked about me being with Mike on the Gettysburg trip!"

"Uhm, yeah," Jocelyn said sheepishly. "Never mind, Mike."

I chuckled, "More like what passed for that a few years ago."

"What are you implying?" Jocelyn asked.

"That he had his mind blown, along with everything else, by his fantasy lover!" Clarissa laughed.

"That whole thing surprised me," Jocelyn said.

"More growing up," I replied. "Tasha and I both had stars in our eyes and ignored the reality of our situation."

"But aren't you and Elizaveta basically doing what you and Tasha decided was impossible?" Jocelyn protested.

"The key difference is Tasha could never be a clergyman's wife," I replied. "Her relationship with her dad and her experience growing up made that impossible. Not to mention, she wants to start a family on her honeymoon, while Elizaveta is OK with waiting a few years. And finances are quite different, as well."

"Is that really a good reason? The financial one, I mean."

"It's one of many," I replied. "I had to look at the practical considerations. I also had to look at how much time I would have for my wife and consider the proper

time to start a family. Those are key things on which Tasha and I couldn't agree, and ignoring them would have been foolish in the extreme."

"Now, THERE is the Mike Loucks I know and love!" Jocelyn teased. "Logical and practical in the extreme."

"I'm over that," I replied. "But that doesn't mean ignoring those things. Romantic love isn't enough to overcome fundamental disagreements about what you want from a marriage."

"Are you in love with Elizaveta?"

"That's a difficult question to answer," I replied. "I love her, but I don't know that I'd call it 'in love'. And here's the practical Mike again -- «agápē» is the kind of love we need to make this work. In a sense, when she proposed to me, it was creating 'Team Loucks-Kozlova' to live our lives together, to love each other, to raise a family, and to be faithful Orthodox Christians with a joint ministry in the diaconate. And before you object, were you ever 'in love' with me?"

Jocelyn made a funny face, which expressed the answer before she actually said it.

"No. I just loved you."

"There you go," I replied.

"But you were in love with Tasha, right?"

I chuckled, "Tasha and I were in lust from when she went through puberty. I've only ever really been 'in love' with Angie."

"April?"

"I said the words, but they didn't mean what she thought they meant and probably didn't mean what I thought they meant. I'm positive I've only ever been 'in love' with Angie. That doesn't diminish my love for either of you or for Elizaveta."

"And Elizaveta knows that?" Jocelyn asked.

I nodded, "She acknowledged it when we talked to the Psych Resident at the hospital. She knows I would have married Angie if...well, assuming the 'real' Angie is anything like the one I knew, which is an assumption I simply can't make. Nobody knows what the 'sane' Angie is like when it comes to relationships. She had problems in High School and before, and unless I am totally misunderstanding what Doctor Mercer and our Abnormal Psych textbook are both saying, those were all symptoms of her schizophrenia, or what might turn out to be borderline personality disorder. But until they negatively impacted her functioning in the world, they weren't a problem, and given how messed up and confused teenagers are in general, not seen as signs of mental illness."

"That is downright scary," Clarissa said.

"Which was exactly how Elizaveta responded. I read way ahead in our textbook, and if you look at the cluster of symptoms, any of us could be diagnosed, except for the fact that all of us are able to function in society. It only becomes classifiable as a mental illness when it creates significant impediments to, and I used this advisedly, 'normal' functioning. There is actually no such thing as 'normal'. 'Normal' is simply a way of bounding behaviors on a graph, and saying the 'average' is what we'll shoot for even though nobody is really average; they're just within the bounds of the graph that allows for a bit of variation and some eccentricity."

"How is your paper coming along?" Clarissa asked.

"Unfortunately, I have personal experience which is making it easier to write."

"When will you call to check on her?" Jocelyn asked.

"I figure Monday so that an entire week has passed. If anything dramatic changes, Father Stephen will call me. And probably after Monday, I'll leave it to Father Stephen because I'm part of the problem. Even if I were in a position where I could care for her, the State of Ohio would never allow me to marry her because she can't reasonably give consent. And because of that, all I end up doing is triggering her breakdowns. It's happened three times now. I think seeing her will do more harm than good until she comes to terms with the situation, if she ever can."

"And if she can't?"

"I really don't want to think about that," I replied.

"If we can go back to the first thing you told us," Clarissa asked, "what do you plan to say in your speech?"

I shrugged, "I hadn't thought about it, really. Maybe it'll be about growing up."

"Given how much you've changed, that makes sense," Jocelyn said.

"And there are enough 'Mike Moments' to keep everyone in tears from laughing so hard!" Clarissa teased.

"Gee, thanks," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Love you too!"

"Maybe WE should write it for him," Jocelyn teased. "You know, *From Shithead to Surgeon: the Mike Loucks Story!*"

"I'm not going to be a surgeon," I replied dryly.

"Dumbass to doctor?" Clarissa said 'helpfully'.

"I can get this kind of abuse anywhere," I said flatly.

"No, you can't!" Jocelyn said, laughing. "Your sister doesn't give you any shit these days. And, all kidding aside, there's another topic to include -- relationships."

"Hmm," I replied, thinking about it, "You, Clarissa, Angie, Elizaveta, Liz."

"Milena, Doctor Blahnik, Doctor Mercer," Clarissa added.

"You might have really missed out on something there, Mik," Jocelyn teased. "A glass of wine and a warm bubble bath with the smoking hot music professor!"

"She did invite Mike to live in the house after graduation!" Clarissa added with a smirk.

"You two are troublemakers!" I protested.

"As if THAT is news!" Jocelyn replied.

"You have a point. Anyway, I need to say my prayers and get some sleep."

We stood up, the girls hugged me in turn and left so I could do my prayers and get to bed.



February 23, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"It's not fair that I can't come to the concert!" Elizaveta protested after lunch at her house on Saturday.

"I don't like the rule," I replied, "but I understand why they put it in place."

"But Lara isn't eighteen until May!" she protested. "And SHE can be there."

"I know," I replied. "She's a student, and they made an exception for her to live in the dorms because she's emancipated and considered an adult."

"I would get it if they said I couldn't spend the night, but just visiting?"

"You do realize that you can have sex during the daytime, right?" I teased. "And that it doesn't have to be in a bed?"

Elizaveta blushed slightly, "I suppose not. I hadn't really thought about that."

"It's one of the reasons the 'overnight guests' policy was always a joke. The new one, which says no more than two consecutive nights and no more than three days out of seven, makes sense because it prevents someone from basically moving into the dorm and living for free. And from a liability standpoint, at least according to my friend Melody, the age limit helps protect the university. And they've had a few problems in that regard."

"So you agree with them?"

"No, I simply gave the rationale as to why they have the rule. And it's not like it really causes me any grief except in this special instance. We'll give a public concert in early May. José actually suggested we form a band, though I'm concerned about time to practice."

"You'll be practicing your guitar anyway, won't you? To learn new songs?"

"I'd expect so, yes. I told him I'd think about it and see what things looked like in August. I do find playing music relaxing. But until I actually start doing homework, I won't know how much time I can dedicate to music. You have to come first!"

"Not before your studies!" Elizaveta protested. "I know you have to focus on them, and they'll take a lot of your time."

"That's true, but I have to balance our relationship, school, and church. And your dad is going to want me to play golf, too."

"We'll work it out. I'm not needy!"

"I've yet to meet the Russian woman I would call 'needy'," I said with a grin. "Demanding? Controlling? Sure! Needy? Never!"

"You!" she squealed and smacked my arm. "I meant to tell you earlier -- all the rooms in the cottage have been painted, and I'm working on replacing the curtains. And I'm going to make nice covers for the couch, loveseat, and chair in the living room."

"Whatever you want!"

"As it should be! I also got two desks for the smaller bedroom, one for you, and one for the computer and printer Dad is going to get for me."

"If you're happy, I'm happy. I've basically been living in the dorm for four years. For me, the cottage is a serious upgrade."

"But you spent a lot of time at your professor's house, right?"

"Some, but because I'm an RA, I can't be away too much."

"You know, I never asked, but do you have many problems?"

"Not really. Most of the people on Rickenbacker 8 are either close friends or were invited by close friends to live on the floor. We get a few Freshmen every year, but peer pressure keeps them in line. Mostly, it's been dealing with roommate disagreements, and even those are pretty tame. There have been a couple of incidents with drugs and one diabetic coma, but that's it. One of the things Dean Parker wanted was for every RA to become a snitch for the administration -- tell on anyone doing anything she didn't like. And not just passively but actively. Like a police state."

"She sounds crazy."

"We all thought she was. The students mostly hated her. We were very happy when she resigned."

"Why?"

"She tried to use the lies those psychiatrists told against me on multiple occasions. After the last one, she was asked to resign. But she was after me even before that because of that incident in the lab I told you about. I suspect she's having a complete meltdown over my selection to give the valedictory speech. Not that I'm concerned about her. She's out of my hair for good."

"Changing the subject, there's a movie I want to see but can't because it's R-rated."

"Which one?"

"*The Breakfast Club*. I think it's dumb to have a movie about teenagers that teenagers can't see!"

"I agree. Once we're married, then technically, I can be your guardian. For now, I can't, at least according to the local ordinance."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing about the rating system prevents a theatre from showing a movie without a rating or letting in anyone they want, according to Melody. The rating system is voluntary. BUT, there are communities which have passed ordinances, so a theatre can be fined if it lets someone under seventeen into the movie without a guardian. And that could be your brother or your parents or grandparents."

"I am NOT asking my dad to take us to the movies! That is SO dumb! It's a movie about teenagers!"

"There's that feisty Russian girl I know!" I grinned.

She glared at me but then laughed and kissed my cheek.

"Look at it this way," I continued, "at least we'll be able to see the movies on videotape at some point. Your dad has a VTR."

"They're calling them VCRs now."

"Shows how often I even think about them! You know, I wonder if you could put a movie on a plastic disc as they do with music."

"How do those work?"

"According to the guy at the music store, there's a thin layer of metal in the middle that they punch holes in with a laser, and then the player uses a laser to read those holes and turn it into music. They sound really good, but it's almost like it's too clean."

"That's not possible! Nothing can be too clean!"

I chuckled, "I'll remember that about our house."

"Don't you have to have everything totally clean as a doctor?"

"For surgery, yes. For the emergency department, your hands, the instruments, and your scrubs, yes, but not really anything else. According to my biology professor and the professor who taught reproductive physiology, the single biggest improvement in medical outcomes came when doctors started washing their hands with soap and water between patients. Doing that, and wearing a mask, takes care of most of the infection risks, at least according to them."

"Seriously? The single biggest innovation was washing hands?"

"Yep. An Austro-Hungarian physician, Doctor Ignaz Semmelweis, who worked in a hospital in Vienna, discovered that fatal infections were spread among patients by doctors who failed to wash their hands between examinations. He instituted a new set of guidelines which required doctors to wash in a chlorine solution after autopsies and with soap and water between patient exams. He also made them change lab coats, though now they do it with scrubs. The mortality rate went down dramatically. The sad part, according to my professor, is there are still doctors who don't do that."

"Gross!"

"I agree! And do you know how he figured it out?"

"How?"

"Women who delivered babies attended by doctors had five times the mortality rate of women who had their babies delivered by midwives. The only difference was doctors did autopsies, and midwives didn't. So he decided something was being carried by the doctors from the autopsies to the wards. Clean lab coats and washing hands stopped it. Unfortunately, he wasn't very tactful, and the way he presented it upset the doctors, who felt they were being unfairly blamed. So even though it worked, the doctors fought him and stopped doing it."

"What?!"

"I know! It's pretty stupid. His procedure reduced mortality to below 1% in the maternity wards, but because he was tactless and was going against the establishment, he lost. It was only after Louis Pasteur confirmed 'germ theory' and Joseph Lister developed hygienic procedures that it became widespread. I first heard about it indirectly in a psychology class, where they referred to the 'Semmelweis effect', which is a metaphor for the tendency to reject new evidence or new knowledge because it contradicts established beliefs in an almost reflexive way. It happens a lot. And in this case, one of the arguments was that the hands of a 'gentleman' could not possibly transmit disease."

"Oh, come on!" Elizaveta protested. "Even I know that's dumb, and I'm only a Sophomore in High School!"

I chuckled, "A hundred-and-fifty years makes a big difference. Modern science was really in its infancy in the mid-19th century, and if there's a more conservative group of people than the Orthodox faithful, it's doctors. I ran into it again when I read about a book called *The Myth of Mental Illness* in my Abnormal Psych textbook. It basically argued that concepts of mental illness, as they were held up through the 50s, were all wrong and that much of what was being

diagnosed as mental illness was really just people being improperly adjusted to life. He made some VERY good points which helped change psychiatry and psychology for the better. You benefit from a century-and-a-half of scientific progress those doctors didn't have."

"And the doctors who don't do it today?"

"I'd call it lazy, I guess. It's not something I'd even consider after my biology and biochemistry classes. There are some REALLY dangerous infections and diseases which can be prevented by washing your hands and covering your mouth and nose with a tissue or handkerchief when you sneeze. It really is that simple. Want to hear something else gross?"

"Probably not, but OK."

"There are a lot of people who don't wash their hands after using the toilet."

"OK, I did NOT need to know that!" she said, making a face. "Who would do that?"

"Quite a few people, apparently. Another one is prevention of salmonella -- do you make sure that raw chicken NEVER touches anything that isn't immediately washed? The knife? The cutting board? The counter? Your hands? A cooking spoon?"

"I'm pretty careful about that because in Home Ec they talked about food-borne diseases. My grandmothers aren't as careful."

"Why?"

"Because they've always done it that way!"

"Tradition is good in church, not so much when it comes to our acceptance of scientific truth. That's the 'Semmelweis effect'."

"What about eating raw cookie dough? There was a huge discussion about raw eggs."

"Given the government regulations about processing eggs before you buy them, I don't think there's a real concern. If there was, people would be getting sick right and left from eating raw cookie dough or eating eggs sunny-side up. In the past? It might have been an issue. Now? Not so much. We have different problems, like Toxic Shock Syndrome, because of modern technology."

"They told us about that in health class. Who would leave a tampon in there for a week? Gross? I mean, I use pads, but seriously? A week? Gross!"

"They were marketed that way," I replied. "We talked about it in our reproductive physiology class. People believed the marketing claims, which were based on testing that worked out. Until it didn't. You can only do so much testing, and you might not have that one case in a million that goes bad until you release it to the public. That's happened with drugs before. And I don't know a good solution because you're going to have people have bad reactions to just about anything. The question is, how bad and how many?"

"One of my biochemistry professors asked us to do a thought experiment. Let's say that we invented a drug which cured cancer in 95% of patients but killed the other 5% immediately, and you had no way of knowing which was which. What would you do? Would you allow the drug to be sold? Would you allow anyone with cancer to take it without restrictions? Make sure you factor in what percentage of people die of cancer in your thinking."

"I guess if you had a cancer that was fatal, it would be OK to take it because it would improve things for 95% of the people."

"OK. What if the cancer was 50% fatal? And you didn't know which 50% would die? The drug would save 95% of the people at the cost of possibly 5% who wouldn't have died. I'd take that chance at that level. But as the risk of death from cancer downwardly approaches 5%, you have to think about it more. I'm not sure where the line is. Well, that's how drug approvals work -- you try to figure out where that line is.

"There are some people who argue that if a patient is terminal, then the doctor should be able to try any treatment which he feels is ethical and to which the patient agrees, no matter how experimental, so long as the drug is approved for human trials. I think that makes sense. If you're going to die, why should you not try something completely experimental? I wouldn't go as far as some who say ANY treatment because laboratory and animal testing have some value in making sure the drug has at least some level of efficacy validation first."

"You learned all this before medical school?"

"In our honors biology, chemistry, and biochemistry classes. We did lots of things we'll do in medical school. Those classes created the foundation we can build on with more in-depth knowledge and eventually specialization."

"Very cool. I didn't realize how much you learned before medical school."

"In High School, I read lots of books on medicine and disease to get a head start. Clarissa did the same thing, only she took it a bit further working in a clinic during her Summers."

"What do you think about the Tylenol deaths in Chicago a few years ago?"

"I think ingesting potassium cyanide is universally fatal," I replied. "Beyond that, even the police and FBI have no clues. But that's why when you buy over-the-

counter medication, the packaging has all kinds of safety features. And if you think about it, they make sense, just like the child-resistant lids on drugs and lots of chemicals. Just that simple change cut deaths almost in half after it was made law in 1970."

"Such simple things."

"Exactly. Just like hand washing."

We had a nice afternoon together, ate an early dinner, then headed to Vespers. After Vespers, I took Elizaveta home, then headed to campus for the concert. José and I set up in the common area and waited for our dorm mates and their invited friends to assemble.

"Interested in a last fling with a couple of sex-crazed groupies?" Jeannette asked, with Marie standing next to her.

"I believe I would be tortured and killed if I took you up on your generous offer. No, actually, I'm positive I'd be tortured and killed. So, I'll defer to my fellow musician, José."

"Not on his life!" Dona declared. "I'm sure HE will be tortured and killed if he takes them up on it!"

"Sorry, ladies," José said soberly. "I appear to be unavailable."

"Some musicians you are!" Marie teased.

"They just value their lives!" Dona exclaimed.

The girls went to sit down, and José and I kicked off our first set. As we'd agreed, José played lead guitar, and I played rhythm for most of the songs, and he sang

backing vocals to my lead. When we finished the first set, we took a break, then started the second, in which we each had solos -- mine was *Born to Run* and his was an instrumental piece from *Carmen*.

When we finished, our assembled friends and guests demanded an encore, so we played *I Write the Songs* and a song which I would have preferred never to hear or sing, *Thank You for the Music* by ABBA. Dona had suggested it to José, and he'd convinced me, over strong protests, that it was the perfect song for an encore, properly complementing the Barry Manilow song.

After the second encore song, we took our bows and went into my room with Clarissa, Abby, Jocelyn, Gene, Sophia, Robby, Lee, Kimiko, Brandon, Sandy, Pete, Lara, Jack, and Dona. I put *52nd Street* in the CD player and adjusted the volume. The room was crowded, but it was nice to have all my friends together. In a few short months, things would begin to change as some of us graduated while others remained at Taft. Looming even larger was my upcoming marriage to Elizaveta, which would be followed by my ordination, and then I'd start medical school.

"Have you thought more about the band?" José asked.

"Yes, and it's something I'd like to do, though I honestly need to see how much time I have in the Fall. I did think of one thing -- you mentioned a bass player. Are you thinking of going electric? I've never seen an acoustic bass."

"Acoustic bass guitars exist, but they aren't common. And maybe we don't really need one."

"What do you call someone who hangs around with musicians?" Robby asked with a silly smile.

"A bass player!" José replied with a laugh. "What do you throw a drowning bass player?"

"His amp!" Robby replied.

"I don't think going electric makes sense," José replied. "We both like our acoustics and small venues. And if we were to play in a larger venue, we could always get electric acoustic instruments. That way, we wouldn't be tied to the mics like we are in the auditorium here."

"I would really prefer to stick with acoustic. I didn't ask, but who are the other two?"

"A girl named Kim plays keyboards. She's a Freshman in the music department. The drummer is a guy who goes by 'Sticks', but his real name is Randy. He's a philosophy major."

"So he can starve to death as a musician AND a philosopher?" Jocelyn asked, causing everyone to laugh.

"He wants to work as an ethicist, most likely in the medical field."

"How about this," I said. "Set up a session for Saturday morning, either next week or the week after break and let's see how it goes. I can't commit just yet, but I was encouraged to think about it."

"His master's voice!" Clarissa teased. "With a Russian accent!"

"She doesn't have a Russian accent at all!" I protested. "Even Tasha doesn't have a Russian accent!"

"Ha! But you did admit who it was who 'encouraged' you!"

"Yes, yes; you're very smart," I deadpanned.

"Well, if she's for you playing in the band, her stock went up in my book!" José declared. "And that's in addition to being cute as a button and having a great body!"

Dona smacked him hard on the arm.

"I was just admiring the beauty of God's creation," José said soberly. "And I get abused for it!"

"In your dreams!" Dona replied, causing everyone to laugh.

"I'll lend you my handcuffs if you want," Sandy said casually, causing the room to erupt in hoots and laughter.

"And on THAT note," I declared, "I think it's time for me to say my evening prayers and get to bed!"

We all said 'goodnight', I prayed, undressed, and climbed into bed.

LII. ABBA?

February 25, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday afternoon, after my Russian Literature class, I called Doctor Hoffman to check on Angie.

"She's doing a bit better," Doctor Hoffman replied. "She's taking her drugs, but not willingly, if that makes sense."

"In other words, you don't trust her to take them if you send her home," I replied.

"Correct. We did back off a bit on the dosage of her antipsychotics, and that's helped her lucidity a bit. We're hoping to get her to a point where we can begin proper counseling again and see if we can get her into a frame of mind where she'll take her medication willingly and in the prescribed dosages at the prescribed times."

"I assume Father Stephen visited her?"

"This morning. He gave her Communion and spent about twenty minutes talking to her. I'm not sure how much she actually talked because I wanted to give them privacy because he's her pastor."

"How much damage did I do by coming to see her?"

"It's not that simple, Mike. She has to accept that reality if she wants to leave here and go home rather than to some kind of group home or long-term psychiatric care facility. You had to be the one to tell her; she doesn't trust any of us because of the whole competency question."

"I know the adage 'the truth hurts', but how badly?"

"Badly, but it had to happen. Consider it like surgery to remove a tumor -- there is pain and potentially a difficult recovery, but the alternative is that you die. The pain is necessary for healing. You'll learn this, but one of the things doctors often have to do is inflict pain and suffering on their patients to prevent worse pain and suffering or death. For Angie to have any hope of a life outside a facility, she has to accept the reality of her situation."

"That makes sense, but I also got the feeling that coming to see her would be a bad idea, at least in the short term."

"I think you're right about that."

"And long-term?"

"That's an open question, really. Doctor Mercer seemed to think you'll be valuable in helping Angie, but the other doctors here disagree."

"I can see both sides," I replied. "In the end, though, it all depends on Angie. I think, at this point, the best approach for me is to have Father Stephen keep me up to date on her progress and take his counsel as to what to do. I know he's in touch with her parents and her doctors, including Doctor Mercer and whoever Angie's main psychiatrist is."

"You don't know?"

"No. It's really not any of my business. If he wants to talk to me, Doctor Mercer, Father Stephen, or Angie's parents can give him my number."

"You seem pretty calm. Are you doing OK?"

"Resigned, I think, is the correct word. I've had plenty of time to come to terms with it, given Angie has had several incidents in the past, all related to me, basically."

"Remember, Mike, this is not your fault. From everything I know, you've been nothing but supportive and done your best to help Angie, even when she made it very difficult for you to do so."

"I suppose, though I did apply gentle pressure about a relationship before the first incident."

"You didn't know her condition; nobody did. From everything her parents have said and Doctor Mercer has said, you were the model of a supportive friend who was romantically interested. And then, after her incident, when she tried to inappropriately start a physical relationship with you, you resisted despite your deep desire to be involved with her. You did the right thing at basically every step based on the knowledge you had. It's not your fault."

"A perfectly logical answer which doesn't make me feel much better about it."

"I understand. Mental illness takes its toll on family, friends, and loved ones, in addition to the person suffering from it. Everyone wonders if maybe they had just done something different, they could have prevented it. It's my opinion, as a third-year Resident, that the answer to that is there is literally nothing that could have been done to change the outcome in cases which are not the product of some kind of systemic abuse or trauma."

"Neither of those is true for Angie. The incidents with her friend's suicide and with her brother didn't cause this. Seeing her parents copulating didn't cause this. That said, because we don't know exactly what it is that causes schizophrenia or, potentially, borderline personality disorder, it's possible those

things contributed to whatever it is that is the root cause of these kinds of personality disorders."

"What's your opinion?"

Doctor Hoffman took a deep breath and let it out.

"Between you and me, she's classic borderline. We haven't come to that formal diagnosis just yet, but I'm convinced this is far more than schizophrenia. Again, between you and me, this is a difference of generations. The older doctors, the ones in their late fifties or older, are pretty much convinced it's schizophrenia. The younger doctors, the Residents, and those in their thirties believe it's the first stages of borderline. Fortunately, the treatment regimens are similar enough that the actual diagnosis doesn't matter at this point. Time will tell if this is a schizophrenic break or a symptom of borderline personality disorder. And we'll adjust treatment as necessary."

"Is there a difference in outcomes between one or the other?"

"Generally, borderline has better outcomes than schizophrenia, BUT it's highly dependent on the individual and their response to therapy. That said, the suicide rate for borderline is more than double that of schizophrenia. I believe Angie has shown the capacity to function that is indicative of borderline, if we can only get her back to that stability.

"This latest incident began when she was told the State of Ohio would not allow her to marry or even engage in sexual relations because they do not believe she has the mental capacity to consent. If we can get her to accept THAT, then I think we have a very good chance at a positive outcome. Well, positive in the sense she'll be able to work and potentially live independently so long as she has a good support network. Basically, we'd just have to manage her depression and feelings of emptiness."

"Thank you for telling me all of this."

"Do a couple of psych rotations, Mike. I think you'll benefit from them, and I think your patients will benefit as well."

"You're the second person who has suggested that."

"The medical profession, as a whole, is VERY bad about mental health care, both for physicians and for training physicians in other specialties to recognize and deal with mental health concerns. To be blunt, we suck at it as a profession. You can help change that."

"I'm one person."

"Yes, and it always has to start with one person, then a second, and a third, and so on."

"Handwashing," I replied.

Doctor Hoffman laughed softly, then said, "I shouldn't laugh, but yes. It's too bad the profession didn't listen to him, just as they don't listen about mental health. Doctors are a very intransigent group as a whole. Don't be like that."

"I'll do my best. Thanks for the candor."

"You're welcome. Don't hesitate to call if you want to ask questions."

"I won't. Thank you again."

We said 'goodbye', and I pressed the switchhook so I could call Doctor Mercer. I related to her the conversation with Doctor Hoffman, and she agreed, generally,

with Doctor Hoffman's assessment and with my belief that not seeing Angie in the short term, at least, was the right course of action. She asked me to keep in touch, and after I hung up with her, I called Father Stephen, who agreed with me that it was best I stayed away from Angie, making it unanimous. He also promised to keep me posted on any changes and confirmed that he and his wife would be at the wedding and would send back their RSVP card in the next day or two. I thanked him and ended the call.

"So what CAN you eat?" Gene asked when we all gathered for dinner around 6:00pm.

"Not much!" Sophia laughed. "Fortunately, we Greeks aren't nearly as serious as the Russians are about fasting. I'll mostly avoid meat, though I'll eat fish and occasionally chicken, but no pork or beef. We don't pay too much attention to the dairy rules. Mike, well, for him, it's no animal products of any kind, which means no meat, fish, eggs, or dairy. He's going to be eating a lot of spaghetti with marinara sauce, salads, and vegetables."

"Just wait for Holy Week!" Jocelyn said. "He'll eat maybe two full meals the whole week. Just very light snacks and juice otherwise."

"Holy shit!" Gene gasped. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Clarissa replied. "I've seen it a few years in a row now."

"Mike, why?" Gene asked.

"Self-discipline. If I can control one of the most basic desires there is, then I can control others as well. It also helps me focus on what really matters during Great Lent. And I want to make a point -- my fasting rule is mine, and mine alone. What Sophia does is between her and her pastor. It really is nobody else's

business. That said, she and I will both answer questions when we're asked about it by people outside the church."

"How can you manage school and studying without eating?"

"You mean during Holy Week?" I asked. "So long as I eat a small handful of nuts a few times a day and drink grapefruit juice, I keep my blood sugar from going completely out of whack, and I feel fresh and alert. Think about how you feel after eating a big meal, like at Thanksgiving."

"OK, but that's not normal!"

"No, but have you sometimes felt lethargic after a big meal, even one not as big as Thanksgiving?"

"Sure."

"How well do you study then?"

"Never mind!" he said with a laugh. "I'm just curious: do you also give something up for Lent as Catholics do?"

"Rome's whole 'fish on Friday' and 'give up something for Lent' are mere shadows of the traditional fasting rules," I replied. "We don't usually specifically give something up, though I usually don't drink soft drinks during Great Lent. To me, they're a way of indulging myself, and that's not something I want to do during Great Lent. But having one wouldn't be breaking any rule. And by the way, 'rule' means 'ruler' or 'measuring stick', not 'law'. That's why Sophia's rule and my rule are different -- they are spiritual guidance from our pastors."

"So, how does it work when you're married?"

"Elizaveta and I will sit down with Father Nicholas and work out our family rule, which will certainly be less strict than my normal rule. And at that point, trying to follow my stricter rule would actually be spiritually unhealthy. We Orthodox are zealous, but not overzealous!"

"And that rule will change when Elizaveta becomes pregnant and when they have children," Lara added. "Remember, as Mike said, it's guidance for self-discipline, not a law that must be followed."

"So what happens if you break it?" Gene asked.

"I go to confession and pick up where I left off and try again. And it's possible for the priest to adjust the rule if it's causing any issues, be they physical, spiritual, or mental."

"And everyone does this?"

"No, but again, what anyone else does isn't my business because I'm not their spiritual father. I'll worry about me, and soon, my wife, and eventually, my kids. But otherwise? It is literally none of my business. And the moment I compare my rule to someone else's, except for purposes like this discussion, I've defeated the entire point because then it becomes about pride. And that is the root cause of many, many sins."

"I thought money was the root of all evil."

Jocelyn responded quickly, "Before Mike launches into a homily, it's 'the LOVE of money is the root of all KINDS of evil'."

"You're such a sweetheart, Jos!" I said with a grin.

"I didn't pay all that much attention in church growing up," Gene said. "And I quit going when I was about fifteen."

"What church?"

"First United Methodist in Akron. Never went to Sunday School or anything like that."

"Have you been to church with Jocelyn?" I asked.

"She's dragged me there a few times," he replied with a grin.

"Dragged?!" Jocelyn exclaimed, trying to sound outraged but failing.

"Sorry," Gene replied with a smirk. "I went with her because she asked nicely, and I want to keep her happy."

"Now you sound like about ninety percent of the Greek men!" Sophia declared. "If they can get away with it, they sneak out of the service during the homily and smoke a cigarette, then come back in time to hear the *anaphora* -- when the Eucharist is consecrated."

"Hmm..." Gene hummed.

"Fat chance!" Jocelyn declared.

"Changing topics," Brandon interjected, "what is everyone doing for Spring Break?"

"Mike and I are hanging out here in beautiful, scenic McKinley, Ohio!" Clarissa said, causing everyone to laugh.

"Dona and I are heading to Florida with Pete, Sandy, Sophia, Robby, and Lee," José said.

"Home for the week," Lara replied. "Jack's coming along."

"Home," Kimiko said.

"Same for me," Brandon added.

"Fran and I are going to visit my parents," Jason said.

"And Gene is coming to meet my parents," Jocelyn added.

"Mike," Robby asked, "does that mean Clark's mom has to come all the way here to get him?"

"No. Elizaveta and I are having dinner with my parents on Friday evening, and we'll give Clark a ride as far as my house."

When we finished dinner, we headed back to the dorm to study.



February 28, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday afternoon, I met with Doctor Blahnik for my balalaika lesson. She said I was improving and was sure I'd be able to play *Lara's Theme* well enough by the end of May. When we finished, I put the balalaika in its soft case and slung it over my shoulder.

"Mike, when did you start playing rhythm instead of lead?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

"When José suggested we form a band. He'd play lead guitar, and I'd play rhythm and sing lead vocals. The theory is that it will mean less practice time for me. I haven't agreed as yet, but we're going to get together on Saturday morning the week following Spring Break to see if we click. You know the problem. José and Elizaveta both suggested that given I'm going to practice guitar anyway, why not try with a band."

"Who are the other prospective members?"

"Kim Kimura on keyboards and Randy Kyle on drums."

"I know Kim, and she's a good choice," Doctor Blahnik replied. "Who's Randy?"

"A philosophy major who goes by the nickname 'Sticks'."

"A drummer and a philosopher? That sounds like permanent poverty!"

I chuckled, "Exactly what my friend Jocelyn said! Randy wants to be an ethicist."

"That actually might allow him to afford a family and a chance to play drums!"

"Maybe he's the next Phil Collins," I suggested.

"Or maybe not!" Doctor Blahnik said with a laugh. "What are you going to play?"

"Rock and pop covers from the 60s through current. Wait! How did you know I was playing rhythm?!"

Doctor Blahnik smiled, "I was there, hiding around a corner! I almost gave myself away laughing when YOU played ABBA!"

"And if my little sister ever finds out, I'll get no end of grief about it. She's an ABBA fanatic, and I can't stand them."

"ABBA or Disco?"

"That's like asking if I want to be executed by shooting or hanging!" I chuckled.
"Same result in the end!"

"Well, we Europeans like ABBA a lot!"

"You go right ahead! Too much bubblegum for me."

"Do me a favor, please. Listen to *Intermezzo No. 1*. It's from 1975, and I think you'll be surprised. It really shows off the talent that Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson have."

"I've never even heard of that song; what is it?"

"A classical piece, and I think you'll actually like it. Whatever you think of their 'bubblegum pop' songs, they are very talented composers and musicians. There are other pieces I think you'd like, including *Fernando*, *Lay All Your Love on Me*, and *Our Last Summer*. If your sister has all their albums, which I'm guessing she does from your comment, listen to those, then listen to *Waterloo*, *Rock Me*, *Does Your Mother Know*, and *Eagle*. Even if you don't like the songs, I think you'll admit that from a musical perspective, Andersson and Ulvaeus have an amazing talent."

"I've heard a number of those songs," I replied. "Repeatedly!"

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "Yes, I'm sure. But this time, I want you to listen to them with a critical ear, the way Milena taught you in her class. Listen to the texture of

the music, the tempo, and the instrumentation. I have a question for you -- do you know the song *One Night in Bangkok*?"

"Sure. By Murray Head. I've heard it on the radio."

"Do you know the album it's from?"

"I don't recall, no."

"Do you like the song?"

"I do."

Doctor Blahnik smiled, "The music was composed by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, with the lyrics created by Ulvaeus and Tim Rice. You know him, right?"

"I remember from Milena's class -- *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*."

"Yes. Anyway, you just said you like a song by Andersson and Ulvaeus! You should get the album *Chess*, which is the musical that song is from. It came out last year, and I suspect the music store in town can order it for you if they don't have it in stock. Make sure you get the musical concept album. Trust me; your opinion of those two men will change dramatically."

"You want me to basically do a serious music study of ABBA?"

"I am a professor of music! So, yes, because it's outside your comfort zone! You're having too easy a time with Russian literature because you spent so much time with Russians, and you understand the Russian mindset! Challenge yourself

with something new; something that is counter to your usual music. Step out of your comfort zone and take a chance!"

"I positively HATE that song!"

"Fine, but you have your assignment. I'll expect a report back from you in, say, two weeks?"

"Make it after Spring Break. I'm going to have to go visit my sister and her husband in Rutherford."

"Fine. The Thursday after Spring Break I want a written report from you on the two B's in ABBA."

"You're a sweetheart, Doctor Blahnik!"

Her eyes twinkled, "You chose to get engaged before you could find out! See you in class tomorrow."

I nodded and left the college music room to head to Doctor Blahnik's house for catechism with Mark and Alyssa. When I arrived, I put the balalaika in my room, then went back downstairs to wait for the catechumens, who arrived about twenty minutes later. I offered them something to drink, and once we had our drinks, we went to sit in the great room.

"Thanks so much for inviting us on Sunday!" Alyssa said.

"You're welcome! Tasha is very happy to put together a group of young couples in her quest for ultimate power!"

Mark and Alyssa laughed.

"I wish Father Nicholas had approved you and Elizaveta as our godparents," Mark said.

"He made the decision that was in the best spiritual interests of everyone involved, and I trust his judgment on that. One of the most important traits of a faithful Orthodox Christian is to accept the guidance they receive from their spiritual father. Not blindly, mind you, but with humility and submission. Don't check your brain at the door; ask questions and listen to the answers.

"If you feel the advice you're being given is wrong, you tell your spiritual father, and if you can't come to an agreement of one sort or another, then you ask to speak to the bishop. In this case, I'd strongly advise against that because, from a *practical* perspective, there is no reasonable way to disagree with Father Nicholas' decision. And that's why he agreed to my proposed solution -- Doctor Evgeni and Maria as your godparents, and you joining Tasha, Nik, Elizaveta, and me for Sunday meals.

"Nothing about this means we can't be friends or that you can't ask me questions or even for advice, but your first place to go would be the Petrovs. Doctor Evgeni is a great guy, and his wife is a wonderful woman. Elizaveta has a good relationship with her. Basically, what I'm saying is that nobody is pushing you away from Elizaveta and me, nor are they setting up a barrier. The one thing to remember, though, is that in the end, Father Nicholas is your spiritual father and is the ultimate authority as the bishop's representative."

"Uhm, sorry. I didn't realize I wasn't supposed to express that feeling."

I smiled, "It's a fine line. I don't have a problem with you expressing your feelings, and neither does Father Nicholas, so long as it isn't complaining. If you really feel he was mistaken, then go talk to him again about it. My opinion is that he made the right decision, all things considered. As I said, we can be as close as you want as friends."

"Is that true even after you become a deacon?"

I chuckled, "Last I checked, Father Nicholas has friends, and so does Vladyka ARKADY!"

"The bishop?" Alyssa asked, her voice full of surprise.

"Why not? He and my grandfather were friends when they were younger and still are."

"I guess it's just that ordination seems so much more serious than it was at our old church."

"It is, but in the end, they are still men. Shall we begin our lesson?"

We spent our time going through the structure and form of the services, as well as the roles of the participants -- bishop, priest, deacon, subdeacon, acolyte, reader, chanter, choir, and laity. When we finished, they left, and I spent about an hour practicing with my balalaika.



March 8, 1985, West Monroe, Ohio

It had been an uneventful week, and Spring Break was upon us. I bade everyone goodbye, then Clark and I loaded his gear into my car. Once it was packed, we headed to Elizaveta's house to pick her up, and then the three of us set out for West Monroe.

"Did you get the job, Clark?" Elizaveta asked as I turned onto Route 50.

"Got the letter today, in fact. They called on Wednesday and offered, and I accepted. They sent a letter, and I just need to sign it and send it back, and I'll start my new job in Chicago on June 10th."

"What about a place to live?"

"They're going to have somebody they called a 'relocation consultant' talk to me. That person will help me find a place to live. I'll go up for a weekend in April to see some apartments, and I can sign the lease that weekend."

"Driving?" I asked.

"Nah, they'll pay for tickets. I'll fly from Port Columbus. I'll need a ride, if possible, Mike."

"Sure. You going to buy a car?"

"Nah, I'll live in the city and take their subway or elevated trains; what they call the 'L'. A car in the big city is kind of silly. I might eventually buy one, but not right away."

"Did you get into the University of Chicago?"

"I won't know for another couple of weeks, but I should get in. My grades are good, and my GMAT scores were good. The founders of SPSS, Norman Nie and Tex Hull, are from UofC, so one way or the other, I'll get in. I have other news."

"Oh?"

"I asked Amy to move to Chicago with me. She said 'yes!'."

"Wedding bells?"

"Not yet, White Boy! I'll leave that crazy shit to you!"

"Why do you swear so much, Clark?" Elizaveta asked from the back seat.

"Your boy swears too, just in Russian!"

"Certainly not around me," she declared firmly.

"And not often, at least at this point," I added. "I pretty much gave it up. I have to as of the end of the Summer, anyway."

"Yeah, I can't imagine a holy man swearing!" Clark declared.

Elizaveta burst out laughing, and I just rolled my eyes and shook my head.

"Mike? Holy?" Elizaveta asked mirthfully when she finally got control of her laughter.

"Gee, thanks, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I said flatly. ("Kitten")

"Oh, come on!" she said, still laughing. "You would never call yourself holy!"

"Yeah, more like that monk dude, Rasputin!" Clark said.

In the rearview mirror, I saw Elizaveta's amusement turn to a frown.

"Don't go there, Clark," I said quietly and firmly.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Elizaveta.

"Shit, man, sorry," he said quietly, then a bit louder said, "Sorry, Elizaveta."

That killed the conversation for a few minutes, and then we picked up talking about Clark and Amy and their move to Chicago. We arrived at my parents' house just as Clark's mom was parking along the road in front of the house. I waited for her to park, then backed into the driveway. We got out of the car and I helped Clark by carrying one of his bags to his mom's car, and then the four of us went into the house. Mom offered everyone tea or coffee, and after we all had our drinks, we had a nice chat with Mrs. Brody before she and Clark left for Cincinnati.

"How long are you staying, Mike?" Mom asked when they were gone.

"Until about 10:00pm so I can get Elizaveta home before the coach I drove here turns back into a pumpkin."

"How is your Mustang holding up?"

"Pretty well. With the tender loving care Nate gave it, and which it now gets from Zach Gleason at Elizaveta's dad's Ford dealership, it'll last until we can afford to buy a car big enough for hauling kids to sports practice or church or whatever."

"Is he the one who dropped out of Taft?" Dad asked.

"Yes. And according to Viktor Nikolay'ich, Zach is one of their best mechanics. He was probably the most unhappy student I've seen in my four years at Taft, and he's super happy working on cars."

"How is Jocelyn doing?" Mom asked.

"She has a steady boyfriend, goes to church regularly just like when she was home, and she's earning her usual straight A's."

"And Angie?"

I sighed, "Not good at all. She's still hospitalized, and I can't see her for fear of triggering another incident. She's totally frustrated, and there's nothing anyone can do about her frustration."

"You would trigger a breakdown?"

"She's in love with him," Elizaveta said. "And she wants to be with him."

Mom raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

"Full disclosure to my wife seems like the best course of action for a happy marriage and no misunderstandings."

"If Miss Understanding and Miss Communication don't visit your marriage, you'll be the first!"

"I don't think my wife will tolerate any other women in our marriage!" I chuckled.

"No, I won't!" Elizaveta declared. "And what are you talking about?"

Mom laughed, "Think of 'miscommunication' as two words -- 'Miss' and 'Communication' and imagine that's a person."

"Ah!" Elizaveta said with a soft laugh.

"Don't laugh," I advised. "It only encourages her silly jokes!"

"My son used to have a very limited sense of humor," Mom said.

"Go on, get the photo albums," I said with resignation. "I know that's what's coming next!"

Mom laughed, "Right, like there is ANYTHING embarrassing in those photos. The bathtub photos are properly discreet!"

"Why do every set of parents find it necessary to take pictures of their kids in the bathtub?" I asked.

"Because it's cute! And because it lets them embarrass their kids with their girlfriends, spouses, and eventually with our grandkids!"

"I'd like to see photos of Mike when he was little," Elizaveta said.

"Traitor!" I exclaimed, causing both my mom and Elizaveta to laugh.

"Come on, then," Mom said, and she and Elizaveta went downstairs to get the photo albums.

"You know that had to happen," Dad said when the two women disappeared down the stairs.

"Obviously."

"How bad is this with Angie?" he asked quietly.

"It's pretty bad. A lot depends on what's really wrong with her. The outcomes are quite different for the various illnesses. There are two camps amongst the doctors, but fortunately, at this stage, the treatments for the conditions are effectively the same, so they have time to figure it out. This is very different from Liz and Jocelyn. They had issues which resulted from traumatic experiences, and

with a bit of therapy, they were able to function normally. Angie's situation is totally different."

"I'm a civil engineer, and I deal with facts and figures, and everything fits into an equation. I guess medicine is different."

"Want to hear something funny I discovered?"

"What's that?"

"Tasha's fiancé is graduating with a degree in mechanical engineering, and to get his license, he has to have four years of practical experience. A GP only needs three."

"Interesting," Dad replied. "I didn't get my Professional Engineer's license until I was twenty-seven. Four years of work under a licensed engineer and an exam."

"For pretty much anything other than a GP, it takes longer," I replied. "You can get your license as soon as you complete the minimum requirements and take the licensing exams, but you still practice under the supervision of an Attending until you complete your Residency, which technically has nothing to do with your license. And you are a doctor as soon as you graduate from medical school; you just can't practice unsupervised."

"Technically, in most places, you can't call yourself an engineer until you are licensed, but there's some leeway here in Ohio. That said, if you try to represent yourself as licensed when you aren't, they put you in jail. There was a guy a few years ago who was using a fake seal and fake license number and approving plans. Nothing bad happened, fortunately, but he's doing two years in prison, and every single thing he did had to be reviewed by a licensed engineer to make sure."

"Did he have the proper training?"

"Yes, including the experience. He just couldn't pass the test."

"Practicing medicine without a license will get you some serious prison time, too. And the rules are interesting. Right now, as Mike, the college student, I could give all the medical advice I care to, and so long as I don't pretend to be a doctor, I'm reasonably safe from prosecution. Once I set foot in class on the first day of medical school, I can't give any advice that could be construed as 'medical' without risking expulsion and potential prosecution."

"It does make sense. So you start seeing patients during your third year of medical school?"

"If by that you mean mostly watching doctors work? That actually starts the first year. For anything beyond that, yes, during the third year is when we'll be able to do some limited things, such as learn how to insert an IV needle and give injections and be permitted to do basic exams; real procedures come later, during Residency."

"Is there anything left to do before medical school?"

"Other than graduate, get married, go on a honeymoon, and be ordained? No."

Dad laughed, "I meant with regard to medical school! And I took graduation as a given."

"I was asked to give the valedictory speech, so I need to work on that."

"Wow! That's a great honor, Mike! But you? A public speech? Willingly?"

I grinned, "That was Jocelyn's reaction as well. As Clarissa put it, I'm a very different person now from what I was the night I graduated from High School."

"That's very true," Dad replied with a soft smile. "You didn't have the beard."

I chuckled, "An external sign, and one which is almost mandatory for Orthodox clergy! But I can't have a full one like Father Herman or Deacon Vasily because it would interfere with wearing surgical masks, so I'll keep it neatly trimmed."

"To be honest, those huge beards make me a bit uncomfortable; growing up, facial hair was totally frowned upon in my circles."

"Do you remember Seraphim?" I asked.

"Sure. He went to seminary a couple of years before you graduated and is a priest in Idaho. Why?"

"He once said that if your dad didn't have a beard, you had two moms."

Dad laughed, "Did he say that to your grandfather?"

I chuckled, "I have no idea. Grandma doesn't like beards, so Grandpa doesn't have one. Elizaveta likes mine."

"Which, in the end, is all that matters. Everything seems like it's going well."

"It is, minus the situation with Angie. My grades are all A's, and this is a fairly easy semester. I'm having fun playing the guitar for my friends. Church is what it always is, which is exactly what I want. Jocelyn has a steady boyfriend, as I said before, and I like him. Tasha and Nik make a great couple. Clarissa and Abby are going to move in together after Clarissa graduates."

Dad frowned at that last remark but didn't say anything, and I wasn't going to invite that conversation with him. That said, I wasn't going to try to hide Clarissa's lesbianism or her relationship with Abby.

"The car is running fine, and my finances are sound," I continued. "So, yeah, it's going well."

"How is Dale?"

"Itching to move to Seattle. Boeing made him a very nice offer, and he really enjoyed the Pacific Northwest."

"Is he seeing anyone?"

"He's just dating casually because he'll be moving. Clark, on the other hand, invited Amy to move to Chicago with him."

"He got engaged?"

I shook my head, "I didn't say he asked her to marry him, just move with him."

Dad frowned again, and I didn't want to get into that with him. Fortunately, just then, Elizaveta and my mom came up the stairs with four photo albums.

"All of them?" I asked, shaking my head. "«Котёнок» (*katyonak*), you're about to see about a billion pictures of Jocelyn and me, some of which will have Dale in them, and a few other pictures." ("Kitten")

"Those don't start until kindergarten," Mom said. "There are plenty of cute baby and toddler pictures in the first album."

"What about dinner?"

"The sauce is simmering, and I'll put the spaghetti in the pot in about ten minutes."

"I'll take care of it," I said. "Were you planning a salad?"

"Yes. Everything is in the crisper."

"I'll take care of that, too," I replied.

Mom laughed softly because she knew I was looking for a way to avoid being in the room while they looked at photos. I went to the kitchen and checked that the flame was turned up to 'Hi' on the pot of water for the pasta, then went to the fridge and took out all the fixings for the salad. I got a large chef's knife and a wooden cutting board and began chopping the ingredients. When the water boiled, I stopped to put the spaghetti in the pot then finished chopping the salad ingredients. I put everything in a bowl, tossed it, then put the bowl into the fridge.

We sat down to eat about twenty minutes later, and after I gave the blessing, we passed the bowls around so everyone could serve themselves. When we finished eating, I volunteered to do the dishes and asked Elizaveta to help.

"Are you trying to make a point?" she asked quietly as we stood at the sink.

"No. Liz and I always had dish duty when we were growing up, and while I don't live here, it's something I can do to give my mom a break. I know you think this is women's work, but it's not."

"My mom and grandmothers wouldn't let my dad in the kitchen to save his life!"

"I cook, clean, do laundry, and all the other stuff a modern man is supposed to do."

"But I want you to let me take care of you!"

"And I'm not objecting to you doing that," I replied gently. "But taking care of me doesn't mean I can't help. If we do dishes together, we get to spend that time together, AND it gets done faster, so we have more time for other things."

"Of course you have THAT on your mind!" she teased.

"Actually, I didn't! And I'll point out that YOU are the one who thought it and said it!"

"What are you trying to say?" she asked, her hands on her hips.

I leaned close so I could whisper, "That you want to make love just as much as I do!"

She proved me right with a slight blush and a twinkle in her eyes.

LIII. There's nobody else here...

March 9, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, Clarissa and I had breakfast together at Doctor Blahnik's house, where we were both staying during break. I'd slept at the dorm the previous night because it didn't officially close until Saturday at noon, and I had walked over from the dorm. I'd made my toast with jam, sliced a grapefruit, then poured a glass of grapefruit juice and joined Clarissa at the kitchen table where she was eating bacon and pancakes with maple syrup.

"How are things at home?" Clarissa asked.

"Fine. Mom showed Elizaveta our photo albums."

"All Jocelyn, all the time!" Clarissa laughed. "I've seen them. You two were basically inseparable!"

"No kidding. And I'm glad we're close again, though it's not like it was before."

"It's not like it was before between you and me, either."

"You mean because of Elizaveta?"

"Obviously. I really enjoyed cuddling, and we can't do that now."

"Things are good between you and Abby, right?"

"Yes. But despite my orientation, having you cuddle me is different from cuddling with Abby."

"Hugs are OK," I replied.

Clarissa smiled, "Those I will take in whatever quantity your *pussy* cat will allow!"

"It translates as 'kitten'," I replied piously.

"And what I just said NEVER crossed your mind? Not even once after six months of celibacy?"

"Remember, I promised Angie I'd be celibate for as long as it took and did the same with Lara."

"But as active as you were..."

"Do I miss it? Yes. Do I think about it? YES! Is that enough for me to do something stupid? Emphatically, NO!"

"You're not worried about Doctor Blahnik sneaking into your room?" Clarissa asked with a smirk.

"No, because she's ethical. And while she may be free to do what she suggested, she knows I'm not."

"Exactly right!" Doctor Blahnik said, coming into the kitchen.

"How long were you listening?"

"I wasn't," she replied. "I just came downstairs. You two are up early, especially given you didn't sleep here last night, Mike."

"We wanted to spend some time together before my sister and her husband show up to have lunch with Elizaveta, Abby, and us."

"She's bringing her ABBA albums?" Doctor Blahnik asked with a silly smile.

"Yes. And thank you very much for announcing that to the world!"

Both Doctor Blahnik and Clarissa laughed.

"ABBA?" Clarissa asked, tittering.

"A very annoying professor of music decided to yank my chain with an assignment that has NOTHING to do with our literature class!"

"You played ABBA at the concert!" Clarissa declared.

"I backed José on that one -- he sang and played lead."

"And I encouraged Mike to look past what he calls 'bubblegum pop' and see the true talent that Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson have. Did you get the *Chess* album, Mike?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And?"

"Everyone liked it, and you were right."

"What does that have to do with ABBA?" Clarissa asked.

Doctor Blahnik smiled as she had in the music room on Thursday, "The music was composed by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, with the lyrics created

by Ulvaeus and Tim Rice, who did *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*."

"Seriously?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes," Doctor Blahnik replied.

"I would never have guessed!"

"Ditto," I added. "She asked me to listen to a set of ABBA songs, as well as the *Chess* album, and report back on my impression of how talented Andersson and Ulvaeus are."

"Your sister is going to give you serious grief!"

"She did when I called her to ask to borrow her albums!"

"I'll leave you two to finish breakfast," Doctor Blahnik said.

She turned and left before we could say anything, so Clarissa and I finished eating, cleaned up the kitchen, then went to the great room to sit close together on the rug in front of the fireplace.

"Can you believe it's been four years?" Clarissa asked.

"Time has flown," I replied. "It seems like yesterday I graduated from High School, and in six months, we'll start medical school."

"A lot is going to happen in those six months!"

"No kidding! And we've all changed quite a bit."

"You more than anyone."

"I had to," I replied. "Or I would have failed at some point. You do remember me sitting on a bench in the middle of a snowstorm, right?"

"We thought you were suicidal! Not that you would have done it intentionally, but because you were so out of sorts, you didn't care you were freezing to death."

"I appreciate everything you did."

"And Milena, Deb, and Angie."

"If I could change just one thing," I said longingly, "it would be for Angie to have been healthy enough to finish school."

"That would have changed everything," Clarissa replied.

"Only if she was healthy enough to have a relationship, and that I don't think was ever possible."

"Are you still blaming yourself?"

"No, not really. You know the problem, though."

"That you're a trigger. But it's not really you, Mike. It's her illness."

"I know that, and it's why I don't blame myself, but I still feel bad about it. All I can do now is wait."

"Have you thought more about your speech?" Clarissa asked.

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to stick to the first theme I thought of -- growing up. That said, I have a lot more growing up to do."

"I'd say you have about three months to complete that task."

I chuckled, "Not a chance! As my grandmother likes to say, she raised two sons and a husband."

Clarissa laughed, "Nice!"

"But it fits with what Mr. Sokolov said -- God gives us wives to make us better men."

"And your little *pussy* cat is going to 'whip' you into shape?" Clarissa teased.

"Oh, stop!" I protested, but I was laughing.

"I could get Doctor Blahnik, and we could both tease you!"

"So this is how it's going to be?"

"Why change now?" she asked with a smirk.

"Lissa, you're as bad as Liz ever was!"

"Good! I'll take that as a compliment from the likes of you, Petrovich!"

"You would!"

"How about we go watch some MTV?" Clarissa suggested. "I want to see the new music video."

We got up and moved over to the television. I turned it on and used the remote to change the channel on the cable box to MTV. We were rewarded about thirty-five minutes later when they played *We Are the World*. The song was catchy, but what was truly amazing was the sheer number of musicians who were participating.

I could identify nearly all of them, from Lionel Richie, who had the first solo part, to Ray Charles, who had the last, with the likes of Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson, Kenny Rogers, Steve Perry, and Diana Ross, to name a few others, singing solos as well. I was surprised to see Dan Aykroyd in the chorus, along with Michael Jackson's brothers and sisters and a host of others.

"That was much better than *Do They Know It's Christmas*," I said when the song finished. "I wonder why Michael Jackson didn't sing with everyone else, and they spliced in his parts."

"No clue," Clarissa said. "I liked it, too. Do you know if it's available for purchase?"

"No idea, but we can stop by the music store before we pick up Elizaveta for lunch."

"Why don't we leave now? We'll have lots of time to browse."

"Sounds good."

We went to the front hall, put on our Winter gear, then headed out to my car, which was parked in the street in front of Doctor Blahnik's house. I opened the passenger door for Clarissa, and once she had climbed in, I shut the door and went around to the driver's side to get in. Once we were buckled in, I started the car, pulled away from the curb, and headed for the music store. We arrived a few minutes later, and I parked in the small lot behind the building.

We got out of the car and went inside and found the singles of *We Are the World*, and after a moment's thought, I picked up a videotape of the music video, which I would be able to play in Viktor's VCR. We browsed for a bit, and after talking with the clerk, Johnny, whom I'd known for almost four years, I bought a copy of *No Jacket Required* by Phil Collins.

"A drummer who isn't hopeless?" Clarissa asked.

"Call him one of the exceptions that prove the rule," I chuckled.

"Are you dissing drummers?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah," I chuckled, "But we're equal opportunity, and we make jokes about bass players, too!"

"Spoken like a guitar player!" he chuckled.

"You know, it's been over three years, and I never asked if you played an instrument," I said.

"Keyboards mostly. I play the organ at the local Catholic church."

"Saint Augustine? Where Father Jacobs is the pastor?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"He was our professor for Latin and for World Religions," I replied.

"He's a good guy," Johnny replied. "He's leaving at the end of the Summer, though. He's been reassigned to a parish in Columbus."

"I am so happy our priests are not rotated or moved around except in very limited and exceptional circumstances."

"What church?"

"Saint Michael the Archangel Orthodox Church."

"I would have never pegged you for a Russian."

"My dad is Dutch, and I take after him."

"That explains the last name that doesn't end in a 'v'!"

"My mother's maiden name is Borodin, so not *every* Slavic name ends in a 'v'!"

"And not every drummer is hopeless!" he replied.

"True! Anything on your upcoming release list that looks good?"

"Slade has a new album later this month -- *Rogue's Gallery*. And next month, *Around the World in a Day* by Prince and the Revolution. I already planned to set those aside for you when they come in. The other one I think you'll be interested in is *Brothers in Arms* by Dire Straits. That's in May."

"Thanks. We're off to lunch with my sister and her husband and my fiancée."

"See you in a week or two," he replied.

"Absolutely!"

We left the store and got into my car to head to Elizaveta's house. She was ready and waiting, and the three of us headed to Frisch's to meet Abby, Liz, and Paul for lunch.

"Here are your ABBA albums!" Liz said loudly, handing me a brown paper grocery bag.

"I love you, too, Lizard Breath!" I replied.

"She uses mouthwash now, so it's not *quite* so bad," Paul said deadpan, causing me to double over in laughter.

"Paul!" Liz growled in protest.

"Hey, announcing the contents of that bag was a swipe at EVERY red-blooded man on this planet! We have to stick together!"

"What's wrong with ABBA?" Abby asked.

"Don't ask!" Clarissa said, laughing softly.

"It's for an assignment," I said firmly.

The hostess led us to a large corner booth and after we sat down, took our drink orders. When she brought them back, she took our food orders and left to put them in with the kitchen.

"Everything going OK?" I asked Paul.

"I don't think things could be much better, really. I talked to Mr. Zhuravlyov to see if there was any way Liz and I could buy the motel from him when he retired."

"Wow! What did he say?"

"That it was something he would consider. The biggest problem will be our ability to get a business loan with a felony on my record. But it's a few years off, so we have time."

"I hope that works out for you both. That would be awesome."

"We think so, too. Anything new on your front?"

"Not since the last time we had breakfast. Things are moving along."

"And Dad is still being Dad," Liz added.

"I know," I replied. "I got looks from him when I said Amy was moving to Chicago with Clark and they weren't getting married, and when I said something about Clarissa and Abby."

"What about us?" Abby asked.

"My dad has very conservative views on anything to do with sex or sexual orientation. He doesn't approve of ANY of our choices, be they Paul's, mine, yours, Clarissa's, or Liz's. He does approve of Elizaveta, though he gave me grief about her age."

"WE gave you grief about her age until we got to know her," Abby said.

"I just don't get why everyone is so freaked out about me being fifteen and being ready to get married!" Elizaveta fumed. "It's not like anyone is making me do it or that I have to do it; I WANT to do it. Mike is the perfect guy for me, and he needs a wife, so I asked him to marry me!"

"It's true what they say about Russian women," Paul said soberly. "Even half-Russian!"

"HEY!" Liz protested.

I chuckled, "Right, Liz, because you aren't every bit as headstrong as EVERY Russian woman in either parish!"

"He has a point, Liz," Paul said with a smirk.

"Guess who's sleeping on the couch?!" Liz threatened.

"Uh-huh," Paul said smugly. "We'll see who gives in first on THAT topic!"

Everyone other than Liz laughed, though Elizaveta also blushed slightly.

"You walked right into that one, Lizzy," I grinned.

"All you Russian girls are VERY passionate but VERY headstrong!" Clarissa teased.

"So true!" I agreed.

I moved my hand to touch Elizaveta's and gave hers a soft squeeze, causing her to smile. The waitress brought our food and I gave the blessing, for which Liz rolled her eyes, and then we started eating. When we finished, we drank coffee and chatted, and then Paul and Liz headed back to Rutherford while Clarissa went with Abby, and I took Elizaveta back to Doctor Blahnik's house so we could spend some time together before Vespers.

When we arrived, we went to the music room, and I put on one of Doctor Blahnik's classical albums I very much enjoyed -- *The Planets* by Gustav Holst. Once I'd adjusted the volume, I went to sit with Elizaveta on the loveseat. I put my arm around her, and she snuggled close. We exchanged a few soft kisses, but then they became a bit more heated and eventually searing.

"Mike," Elizaveta whispered, "there's nobody else here..."

I was VERY tempted, but doing anything beyond kissing was a recipe for disaster.

"We can't, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I replied as gently as I could. "I want to, but we both know we'd have to confess, and that would create serious issues with my ordination. Father Nicholas was very clear -- no slip-ups in that regard."

("Kitten")

She pulled away and crossed her arms.

"So you could do it with Tasha and Jocelyn? But not me?"

"No, I couldn't. But I did. And it created significant questions in Father Nicholas' mind. I promised him, before I even came to dinner at your house, that I was going to be chaste. He made it clear that if I wasn't, that would mean I wouldn't be ordained. You know I can't lie to him."

Elizaveta frowned, but I knew she didn't really have an answer. I wanted to be with her as much as she wanted to be with me, but the price was just too high.

"No," she said slowly, her voice clearly communicating her frustration. "You can't lie. But it's just so wrong!"

"I'm sorry you're frustrated," I said. "And I'm sorry I disappointed you."

Elizaveta smiled, "I forgave you for what you did with them!"

"But not for refusing you now, even though we'd both be in trouble with Father Nicholas, and I'd be in trouble with the bishop?"

Elizaveta screwed up her face because there really wasn't a resolution to what she so clearly wanted except time. There were only about eleven weeks to go, and in the scheme of things, at least for me, that wasn't a long time. For her, though, it might be an eternity.

"Promise me something?"

"What?"

"We don't stay too long at our reception!" she said fiercely.

"I think that can be arranged!" I agreed.



March 11, 1985, McKinley and West Monroe, Ohio

"So what are we going to do during the day while Elizaveta is in school?" Clarissa asked as we ate breakfast on Monday morning.

"I just planned to chill, so if you aren't with Abby, we can just hang out."

"She's working days at the clinic, so it's just you and me, Petrovich. Tasha is working, right?"

"Yes. We could get together with Jocelyn and Gene; they're just hanging out at Jocelyn's house."

Clarissa smirked, "I bet she's frustrated!"

I chuckled, "I know, right? Her parents are making Gene stay in the guest room. That's kind of my fault, too."

"Oh, please! She basically dragged you to bed with her! She told me that herself!"

"True, but it did disrespect her parents. I made the same mistake, if you will, at my house with Becky."

"Your mom was supportive, though; it was just your dad."

"That's true, but it doesn't change the facts."

"I'm curious; what will you do about YOUR kids?"

"I think you're asking the wrong half of the relationship!" I chuckled. "But that would present a potential issue with the bishop because of my position. It's one thing if they're sexually active, and I don't officially know about it; it's another thing to condone it in my household."

"You're really going to be living under a microscope!"

"Voluntarily. Fundamentally, everything I believe conforms to what people expect of me. And, to be honest, it's how I should have conducted my life for the past four years."

"And then you would still be basically the same person you were in High School, and THAT would be a disaster of epic proportions!"

"There had to be another way," I replied. "One that would have created a similar result without bedding a score of girls."

"And yet, I can't imagine you regret all of them."

"No, and if you mean you, then absolutely, positively no!"

"And there is no way you could have avoided being with Tasha, right?"

"Yes, and you can go down the list and probably find justification for most of them, but that doesn't make it right. I knew I was sinning, and I did it anyway."

"And again, the Mike who supported Liz and Paul, who I came out to, who befriended Robby and Lee, who is going to make an excellent doctor, husband, and deacon, wouldn't exist without all those experiences. You can't point to any of them without the risk of some fundamental difference in who you ultimately became. For example, you needed to be with Milena for you, for her, and for me. And you can argue that it was all sinful until you are blue in the face, and I'll tell you it was necessary for all of us to become who we are. And if you tell me God says otherwise, I'm going to call BS."

"That is a very difficult question because God does not condone sin, nor does He intend that we sin. Fortunately, his love is great enough to accept me when I fall short. The problem is that I acted intentionally. But I'm not alone in that, either. In the end, all I can do is acknowledge that I've failed to live up to God's standards and resolve to do better in the future. The way I see it is that if David can be called a man after God's own heart after his adultery with Bathsheba and then arranging the death of her husband Uriah, then I believe there is hope for recovery even from grave, intentional sin."

"Hang on! I know about David spying on Bathsheba in the tub, but I never heard about what happened to her husband."

"Once Bathsheba turned up pregnant, David tried to convince Uriah to sleep with her, but because Uriah had troops in the field, he refused. That created a serious problem because Uriah would know the baby wasn't his. So David arranged for Uriah to die in battle by ordering the men around him to fall back, leaving Uriah exposed. That allowed David to marry Bathsheba. Nathan, the prophet, came to David after this and told him a parable which cut right to David's heart. David's child by Bathsheba died shortly after birth, but her second son, I'm sure you know -- his name was Solomon.

"I know you've heard me refer to Psalm 50, and we read that during Matins, and I also read it three times a day as part of my daily prayers. It's David's Psalm of repentance after Nathan came to him and accused him of sinning with Bathsheba and against Uriah. *'Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy...wash me thoroughly from my sins and cleanse me from all iniquity. For I acknowledge my sin, and my sin is ever before me...Thou shall sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Thou shall wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow...Turn away Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and steady me with a guiding spirit.'*"

"I'm going to assume you have that Psalm memorized."

"Yes, that was only part of it. I've also memorized the six Psalms from Matins and a few others we use all the time. Monks memorize all of them."

"One thing I'm sure of, and that is you are NEVER going to be 'Monk Michael!'"

"No kidding! You know what my grandfather said! His worst nightmare would be his own grandson being his bishop! He thinks it's bad enough his friend became a bishop!"

"I would think someone like him would be pleased with that."

"Nobody wishes the episcopacy on anyone they love!"

"I can actually believe that. Why don't you call Jocelyn and see if she and Gene are free for lunch?"

I made the call, and they were, so around 11:00am, Clarissa and I left McKinley for West Monroe, where we met Jocelyn and Gene at Marie's Diner.

"How are things with your parents?" I asked once the waitress took our orders.

Jocelyn frowned, "No change."

"None from my dad, either," I replied. "On any front."

"I think moving out was the best move you made."

"It's odd," I said. "Our parents treated us like adults until we actually became adults, and then suddenly they started treating us like kids again."

"I don't get that," Gene said.

"It's odd, but it's also simple," I replied. "Jos, Dale, and I were all 'goody-two-shoes' and pretty much behaved the way our parents wanted us to and made decisions of which our parents approved. Once we became adults, we started doing things and making decisions of which they didn't approve. That puts them

in full 'disapproving parent mode', something we never really experienced growing up."

"We didn't even get that to any real grief when we went to Cincinnati together for a few days."

"Because they thought you two were a permanent couple," Clarissa said. "In their minds, you were basically married at age five!"

"In our minds, too," Jocelyn said. "We just didn't realize it. Well, that's not quite true -- I knew I had feelings for Mik, but they scared me, so I hid them. If there was a mistake, that was it."

"And yet," I said, "neither of us was ready for what that would have meant, and I'm not sure it would have turned out to be the fairy tale we each imagine it might have been. And here's the really scary part -- the emotional pain might have been worse."

Jocelyn nodded, "As awful as things were, sickeningly, they could have been worse. And as much as I would never wish what I went through on anyone, I'm here, happy, and on my way to my law degree with my best friend sitting across the table from me."

"Angie?" I asked quietly.

Jocelyn nodded, "Yeah. Sorry for bringing that up."

I shrugged, "It's reality. And when I look at what you went through and what Liz went through, and how terrible things were, both of you have come through it. Maybe not the way you wanted, but you both have wonderful futures ahead of you, just as Clarissa and I do."

"Liz?" Gene asked.

"My little sister," I replied. "She had some serious problems a few years ago, but with good counseling, she came through them. She's married and going to junior college."

"Are they going to have kids?" Jocelyn asked.

"Eventually, I think. She's only nineteen and not even remotely ready. I figure maybe four or five years from now, and hopefully, that'll be enough for my dad to finally lighten up."

"He didn't approve?" Gene asked.

"It's a long story," Jocelyn said. "I'll explain as much as I can later, OK?"

Gene nodded, "I seem to get that a lot with anything to do with Mike!"

"Be thankful you haven't had to sit through the photo deluge!" I chuckled.

"You mean the albums full of photos of you and Jocelyn? Her mom showed me one after dinner last night."

"Elizaveta got the full treatment last Friday night."

"Where is she?" Gene asked.

"Their Spring Break is next week, so she's at school."

"You and Jocelyn have the weirdest relationship ever," Clarissa said, shaking her head. "Your parents show all those pictures to Elizaveta, and Jocelyn's parents show all those pictures to her boyfriend?"

"As I said on Friday night," I replied with a grin, "there are VERY few pictures of me from kindergarten to graduation that don't include Jocelyn, and many of those have Dale in them. Well, starting in second grade."

"We had a spat, and he started being friends with Dale," Jocelyn said. "I realized I needed to mend fences, or I'd lose him."

The waitress brought our food and I gave the blessing, and then we started eating.

"What was the spat about?" Gene asked.

"Lost in the mists of time, as Mike says," she replied. "None of us remember why I was upset with him. But he started talking to Dale, and I almost lost him for the first time. I told you about the second time after my accident."

"The fact that you two managed to sort it out is pretty amazing," Clarissa said. "I can't imagine the stress on two eighteen-year-olds. Well, I can because I saw Mike every day as he was going through it."

"We hurt each other pretty badly," I replied. "Jos, when do you take your LSAT?"

"In the Fall. I can pretty much take it at any time now, but I decided to prep over the Summer and then take it."

"You'll ace it," I replied. "You've aced every test you've ever taken!"

"Says the man who is giving the valedictory speech at graduation in May!"
Jocelyn exclaimed.

"I actually think Clarissa should have been the one to do it," I said. "After all, without her, I would never have been able to do it. And her grades are as good as mine, and she's had the same awards I've had."

"There is no way in Hell I'd get up and give that speech!" Clarissa declared. "I'm surprised YOU are willing to give it."

"I blame the conspiracy to get me to play guitar! And that idiot preacher on campus who went after Robby and Lee."

"I haven't seen those guys in a while," Gene said.

"They'll be back now that the snow has melted, though not the youth pastor. He took a position in Rutherford."

"I heard you embarrassed him pretty thoroughly."

I nodded, "It's not difficult when your opponent comes to a battle of the wits unarmed!"

"What will you do when they come back?" Gene asked.

"Nothing if they don't harass my friends. If they do, then I'll say whatever is necessary to get them to back off."

"You would think they would have learned from the last time, not to mention their friend going to jail."

"Bigots don't learn," Clarissa replied. "I think you know Emmy's dad, right?"

"Unfortunately," Jocelyn replied.

"Another story I'm missing," Gene said.

"A hard-core racist who forced Emmy to break up with Mike because Mike had Clark for a roommate."

"Pardon me, but what the fuck?!"

"Exactly," Jocelyn replied. "The same guy, along with his buddies, prevented the school from hiring the first black teacher in the district a few years ago."

"Now that's just nuts! I can't imagine anything like that happening in Akron."

"There is a cluster of almost exclusively white counties between Cincinnati and McKinley," I replied. "The Klan used to be active, but they were pretty much taken down by the FBI in the 60s and early 70s. Emmy's grandpa was in the Klan."

"Unreal."

We finished our meal, and both Clarissa and Gene needed the restroom, leaving Jocelyn and me alone for a couple of minutes.

"What do your parents think?" I asked.

"Besides believing I'm a 'fallen woman'?"

"That's total bullshit, and you know it!" I protested.

"Obviously, and I do like the fact you can occasionally use an earthy term now and then."

"So?"

"They like Gene."

"And you?"

"You think I'd just go to bed with someone I didn't really like?"

"No, I don't. But it took you some time to figure out that Bill wasn't the right guy."

Jocelyn smiled, "Gene is patient, loving, attentive, and teachable. In other words, a lot like you! Well, minus that ridiculously huge thing between your legs!"

"Oh, stop!" I chuckled. "Does he make you happy?"

"Very."

"Which is all that matters. How serious?"

"Enough," Jocelyn said with a smile. "Enough that we'll coördinate where I go to law school to where he can work on his Master's in astrophysics."

"NASA?"

"No, he wants to teach and do research. He'll get his PhD once he finishes his Master's."

"And he knows about the issue?"

"Yes. He's OK with adopting."

"Good."

Gene came out of the men's room, which ended my conversation with Jocelyn. Clarissa came out a moment later, and after Jocelyn exchanged hugs with both of us, I shook Gene's hand, and then Clarissa and I headed out to my car for the drive back to McKinley.



March 12, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

Tuesday morning was warm enough that I could run outside rather than in the gym. I decided to run through Doctor Blahnik's neighborhood rather than jog to the campus to run my usual circuit. I ran my usual distance, then walked for about ten minutes to cool down before heading back to Doctor Blahnik's house for a shower and then breakfast with Clarissa.

After breakfast, Clarissa and I relaxed in the great room until about 10:00am, and then we headed to the mall so I could look for a birthday present for Elizaveta. It was still five weeks away, but given I had no idea what to get her, it was time to start looking.

"Any suggestions?" I asked.

"Well, you already bought your *pussy* cat a pussy cat, so that's out!"

"I think you're jealous!" I teased.

"She is really cute and has a fantastic body!"

"I'm glad you approve!" I chuckled. "But she's not going to share!"

Clarissa laughed softly, "I know. But you would, with me, wouldn't you?"

I took a deep breath and let it out, "I would, in different circumstances. Church kind of puts that kind of thing off-limits, even if Elizaveta were interested, which I am sure she is not."

"You'll have to tell me if she tastes as good as she looks!" Clarissa teased.

"Lissa!" I hissed but then started laughing.

"So? Gift?"

"No clue," I replied.

"How about a sweater?" Clarissa suggested. "Maybe something lightweight? White? With buttons up the front?"

"That would work," I replied. "There's a clothing store on the first floor of the mall, and if they don't have what you described, we'll check The Gap and JCPenney."

We headed for the clothing store on the first floor which had 'designer' clothes, though they weren't much more expensive than what I'd find at The Gap. I could afford to spend a bit extra as the grants I'd received had relieved the financial pressure, and the future where I would be living rent-free and where Viktor was paying my medical school tuition had basically freed my discretionary spending to the point where I didn't have to limit myself the way I had the first three years at Taft.

"Mike," Clarissa said quietly, nodding forward. "Isn't that Maggie?"

I looked where she indicated with a nod and saw Maggie Schumacher walking out of a jewelry store. She was with another girl I didn't recognize, and they

turned in our direction. At our current paces, we'd meet them just before Clarissa and I got to the clothing store. I quickly decided I would say 'hello', and if she didn't respond, I'd just let it go.

"Hi, Maggie," I said.

She looked over in surprise as she'd been talking with the girl she was with.

"Uhm, hi," she replied.

"Hi, Maggie," Clarissa said.

"Hi," Maggie replied.

I waited several seconds, and when nothing more was said, I walked into the clothing store with Clarissa right behind me.

"Why'd you walk away?" Clarissa asked.

"The look on her face said she didn't want to talk to me."

"I thought it was just surprise at seeing you."

"At first, I think so, but then the look changed, and she didn't say anything more. And besides, beyond saying 'Hi', there really isn't much to talk about. It's not like there's some chance of a future with her, and even being friends would be dicey. Heck, she hasn't even talked to Liz since things blew up. And you know I was about to tell her I didn't see a future for us when she started avoiding me."

"I suppose that's all true."

"And, to answer your next question, I really don't care what happened at this point. I put all of it behind me. Let's see if we can find the sweater."

We went to a table with the type of sweaters Clarissa had suggested and, to my delight, immediately found exactly what she'd described. The price was right, and after consulting Clarissa on the size, I took the sweater to the register to pay for it. I opted to have them gift wrap it for me, as I didn't have any wrapping paper, ribbons, or bows, and once they'd done that, I paid cash, and then Clarissa and I left the store with the neatly wrapped package in a large shopping bag with twine handles.

"Mike?" I heard a voice to my left say as we exited the store.

I turned to see Maggie.

"Yes?"

"Sorry about before, I was just surprised to see you. I guess I shouldn't be because you've lived in McKinley for years."

"It's OK," I replied. "How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

"Good."

"You're graduating in May, right?" she asked.

"Yes."

She glanced down, and her eyes went wide, "You're married?!"

I shook my head, "Engaged. Orthodox Christians wear rings similar to wedding bands once they're engaged. There are no wedding rings, just two betrothal rings."

"Who?"

"A girl from church named Elizaveta."

"When?" Maggie asked.

"The Sunday after graduation."

"Wow. Congratulations. I assume you got into medical school?"

"Yes. Clarissa and I will be going to McKinley Medical School. Are you seeing Mike Palmer?"

"Yes."

"How's your brother?"

"Enjoying Chicago."

"Are you still working for that lawyer?"

"Yes. And I'm enrolled in McKinley Junior College taking paralegal courses."

"Cool."

"Well, we need to go, but congratulations and good luck."

"Thanks," I replied.

She and her friend turned to walk away, and Clarissa and I headed for the exit to the parking lot.

"That was weird," Clarissa said.

I shrugged, "It makes sense if she didn't know I was engaged, which I guess she didn't. You saw her reaction when she saw the ring on my left hand."

"True, but it still was a bit strange. I mean, why come back to talk to you?"

"Maybe she regrets how she handled the breakup," I replied. "But honestly, I'm not going to waste any time thinking about it. I was going to break things off with her anyway."

"In the past, you would have obsessed about finding out exactly what happened."

"I have far more important things to obsess about!" I replied.

"Isn't THAT the truth!" Clarissa replied.

We both laughed, joined hands, and walked out to the car.

LIV. Halfway there...Livin' on a Prayer

March 15, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"What did I hear you playing?" Clarissa asked when I came downstairs on Friday afternoon.

"Just practicing," I replied.

"Yes, but that was no guitar!" she protested.

I frowned, "I really should have skipped practicing this week. It's a surprise for my wedding."

"Wait! That's one of those Russian guitars like the girl had in *Doctor Zhivago*!"

"A balalaika," I confirmed. "It was Doctor Blahnik's suggestion."

"What songs can you play?"

"The only one I play reasonably well right now is *Lara's Theme* from *Zhivago*, though I'm working on a couple of traditional Russian folk songs. I plan to play *Lara's Theme* at the wedding after Elizaveta and I sing *Up Where We Belong*."

"How long have you been practicing?"

"Since January. Please, please don't tell anyone about this. You're the only one besides Doctor Blahnik who knows."

"You're sure that won't cause a problem with Elizaveta?"

"I'm sure. Keeping things from her for a surprise is OK. I'm sure not going to tell her about her birthday present in advance!"

"Will you let me hear you play?" she asked.

"I suppose now that the cat's out of the bag, it's OK."

"I take it you only practice here?"

"And in the music classroom on Thursdays for my lesson."

"That explains why you come here after classes on weekdays! I always thought it was just to get some 'me time'."

"It is!" I replied with a grin. "And in this case, 'me time' includes practicing the balalaika. And on Thursdays, I meet with Mark and Alyssa."

"So, play for me?"

"Sure. Let me go get the balalaika."

I went back upstairs to get it, then went back downstairs, and we went to the music room, where I played once through *Lara's Theme*.

"That sounded pretty good," Clarissa said when I finished. "I guess playing the guitar helps?"

"Yes and no. There are some similarities but also some major differences. Let me go put this away so I can get to Elizaveta's early enough to talk with her grandmothers about the wedding before our triple date tonight."

I took the instrument back up to my room, changed clothes, then left the house and headed to Elizaveta's. When I arrived, she greeted me with a kiss, and then we went to the kitchen to sit at the small table where she had tea set out. Her grandmothers joined us, and we went over the guest list. Most everyone had responded, and most of those responses were positive. Several of my cousins on my dad's side, as well as his brother's family, had declined, which didn't really surprise me. I didn't know them all that well and hadn't seen them in years. My dad's parents would attend, as well as basically everyone from my mom's side of the family.

I also wasn't surprised that Becky had decided, in the end, not to attend the wedding. Dale was going to attend despite it being the weekend before his finals. He planned to fly into Columbus on Friday morning and fly back to Madison late on Sunday evening. All of my local friends had responded in the affirmative, which I'd known from talking to them. That included Katy Malenkov, who was going to fly home from California for the wedding. On Elizaveta's list, everyone who had responded had responded affirmatively, with only some relatives in Alaska having not sent their response.

"What are we going to do for dance music?" Yekaterina, Elizaveta's maternal grandmother, asked.

"A DJ is fine," Elizaveta said. "Maybe Peter Sytsov could do it? I know he's been the DJ for dances at the High School."

"I think that's OK," I replied. "I have quite a few albums which he could use, if he doesn't have a large collection."

"Will you ask him, Elizaveta?" Yekaterina asked.

"I'll do that on Monday," she replied.

"Mike, is there anything you can't eat?" Tatyana, Elizaveta's paternal grandmother, asked.

"No," I shook my head. "No allergies of any kind. And I like most things."

"OK. We'll finish the meal planning with the country club this week, then send out the cards asking for choice of meals."

"What choices?" I asked.

"Roast beef or chicken, and macaroni with cheese or spaghetti with meatballs for the kids. Viktor will cover wine and beer, as well as the three vodka toasts, but after that, guests will have to pay for hard liquor."

"I think that's all we need you for," Yekaterina said.

Elizaveta and I thanked them, then headed out to my car so we could head to the Chinese restaurant for our triple date with Clarissa, Abby, Jocelyn, and Gene.

"It seems like they have everything under control," I said as I pulled out of the driveway.

"Why are some of your relatives not coming to the wedding?"

"Most of them wouldn't be caught dead inside an Orthodox Church."

"That's rude! Why?"

"Because they think we're Mary worshipers and that the church is full of idols. And that's just the start of it. They honestly don't think we're actually Christians."

"What?!" Elizaveta exclaimed in surprise.

"It's true. There are people at the church Mark and Alyssa used to go to who think the same thing. Remember, we think they are heterodox, which is one step shy of calling them heretics. Remember also, our clergy aren't allowed to participate in any ceremonies in any non-Orthodox churches because we aren't in communion with them."

"So we couldn't, like, stand up in someone else's wedding if they weren't Orthodox?"

"No, we couldn't. At least not if it's performed in a church or by a clergyman. If you wanted to follow the strictest rule, we shouldn't even set foot in non-Orthodox churches. The original canon was really meant to keep Christians out of Jewish temples, Arian churches, or pagan temples. Later, it was extended to mosques, which I think is obvious. The issue with the Roman Catholics has always been complicated, especially given the mutual anathemas. Our bishops believe that with our situation here, especially with having mixed families, enforcing the rule strictly would be detrimental to everyone's spiritual health. So it's just a prohibition on clergy participating in religious ceremonies."

"I never knew that."

"It's not something most people know because it really only affects clergy."

"I have to let Marjorie, Britney, and Johanna know because all of us were going to stand up for each other. Well, not for me because we don't have attendants in a traditional wedding."

"What were they going to do for you?" I asked.

"I'd thought about having them sit with us at the head table, but once we asked the bishop to perform the ceremony, he'll be with us at the head table, and so will

our godparents. And because the bishop is there, Father Nicholas and Matushka Natalya need to sit with us, and probably Matushka Anastasia. At that point, the table is full, and, honestly, I'm not sure it's a good idea to have any non-Orthodox sitting with the bishop."

"I don't think that would bother Vladyka."

"No, but I don't want any of them to do or say something that might cause problems or give offense. And besides, you'd need three guys, too, and that creates a space issue. It's OK. They knew they couldn't participate in the wedding."

"OK. I'll leave that up to you and your grandmothers."

"When are we going to play and sing our song?"

"I think right before our first dance makes the most sense."

"That's what I thought, too. I'll make sure my grandmothers know."

"Did your dad call my dad about giving a toast?"

"I think so, but I'll double-check. Do you have a preference for who makes the third one?"

"Given it should be someone Orthodox, I'd say your brother would be a good choice. The person I'd choose probably isn't the right one for a church gathering."

"Robby?"

"Yes."

"Why not Dale?"

"We haven't really seen each other much for nearly four years. We talk on the phone about once a month, but honestly, I'm closer to Robby than anyone. I'd say Clarissa, but tradition is that it's a male friend or relative. Let's have Gennady do it."

"OK. I'll call him tomorrow and ask him. I'm sure he'll say 'yes'."

"Is your dad flying Anna here for the wedding?"

"Obviously! She'll sleep in our guest room. Mom and Dad would never permit anything else!"

"You're making an assumption, aren't you?"

Elizaveta giggled, "I might have accidentally discovered them in a compromising situation!"

"Oops!" I chuckled. "Do they know?"

"No! I wasn't going to embarrass them!"

"And how long did you watch?" I asked with a grin.

"I didn't!" Elizaveta protested, sounding slightly outraged. "I turned crimson when I realized what they were doing, and I ran away!"

"Is it OK to ask when this was?"

"Last Summer, when she visited."

"I think I'd continue to keep that secret," I said.

"I agree!" Elizaveta replied firmly.



March 18, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Monday, when Clarissa, Sandy, Fran, and I came back to the dorm from chemistry class, I checked my mailbox and found a brown envelope from the State Department. I quickly opened it and found my passport. When Clarissa checked her mailbox, she found hers as well.

"Elizaveta got hers last week," I said. "Abby has hers, so we just need Sandy and Pete to get theirs."

"We applied about two weeks after you guys," Sandy said. "So I suspect it'll be another couple of weeks before ours arrive. I take it everything else is set?"

"Yes. We need to pay for the tickets and train passes by April 12th. The travel agent will take cash, check, or credit card."

"I'll just whip out my American Express and pay for it!" Sandy laughed. "Not!"

"Don't forget you're going to want to get traveler's checks, so we don't have to carry a lot of cash. Fifth/Third has American Express traveler's checks available, and they're the best option according to the travel agent."

We moved to the elevators and got into one that was waiting. I pressed '8', the doors closed, and the elevator began moving.

"How much are you bringing with you?" Sandy asked.

"Between Elizaveta and me, \$2000. That will cover everything we need, including food, souvenirs, paying for tours, film for our camera, and so on, with some left over in case of an emergency. I have my MasterCard, but according to the travel agent, you can't count on places taking credit cards in Europe the way you can here."

"I've never seen you use it except for the motels when we went to Gettysburg," Clarissa said.

"I use it about once every month, just to keep the account in good standing and have that reported to the credit bureau. That was the advice I got from my dad when I first got the card. I use it mostly at the record store, but as I said, just once a month. I don't like the idea of owing anyone money unless there's a really good reason, like a mortgage, student loans, or a car, though, for the car, I'd prefer to pay cash if I could. That won't work for a house, even when we're all doctors!"

Sandy laughed, "Can you imagine walking into a real estate office with a suitcase full of twenties and saying, 'I want to buy a house!'"

"I do believe you could use a check," I chuckled. "It's a bit safer."

"Is there anything else we need to do?" she asked.

"Not that I can think of. The travel agent arranged everything for us, including putting together a list of trains we should take to meet our specific goals and travel efficiently. He's going to get us a copy of something called *Cooks Continental Time Tables* in case we need to make any changes while we're traveling."

"Is Doctor Blahnik going to be at the villa in Spain when we're there?" Clarissa asked.

"It's possible, but she and Derek are talking about going to the Caribbean. She has friends with a place on the French side of Saint Martin."

We got off the elevator, and all of us went to my room.

"I'm a bit curious, and if it's none of my business, tell me, but how does a professor at a small State college have a villa in Spain and a very nice house here in the US?"

"She doesn't hide what happened," I replied. "She told me that when she defected in the early 70s, there was a group which offered significant financial assistance, as well as help finding work, to East Bloc defectors. They arranged for a series of piano recitals around the country which were apparently very lucrative because they solicited donations for her support as well as paying her a handsome fee. She did that for nearly two years, then turned down an offer from the Chicago Symphony to teach here. She preferred the more relaxed life in a small city, teaching at a small college. And she felt this was a better place to raise Milena. Given Milena met Joel here, I'd say that was right!"

"Do you know when she met Derek?"

"About six years ago," I said. "They've been lovers from the first day they met, but it's a strange, casual-but-not-casual relationship. They'll never marry, and they can both see other people if they want to, but I get the picture that doesn't happen very often."

"Except perhaps with a certain well-hung college student with a reputation for being a good lover," Sandy teased.

"Wait!" Fran gasped. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing!" I declared emphatically. "She flirted, that's all."

"If you call basically offering to fuck him senseless after taking a bubble bath together 'flirting'," Sandy said, barely suppressing her laughter.

"That sounds like a proposition!" Fran replied.

"Whatever you want to call it," I replied, "nothing happened. First of all, it would have been against the rules. Second of all, I'm engaged."

"You weren't when she first propositioned you!" Sandy smirked. "That was the night when I could have had Derek if I'd wanted!"

I chuckled, "You DID want to, but you knew I couldn't break the rules."

"Holy crap!" Fran exclaimed, shaking her head. "The things I missed because Jason and I spend so much time together!"

"Only the two of us know all the details," Clarissa replied. "And it really shouldn't be discussed."

"Uhm, sorry," Sandy said, sounding chagrined.

"It's OK," I replied. "Fran is part of the gang, even if she prefers shacking up with Jason to hanging out with us!"

"She's going to study with us full-time next year," Clarissa said. "Not just work with you on lab reports."

"I have no complaints," I replied. "She and I made a good team in that regard, and if she wanted to spend time with the future Mr. Fran Carlson, I'm the LAST person to be in a position to complain!"

"Thank you!" Fran exclaimed.

"Mike," Sandy said, "I should have asked, but are you going to try to go to church in Europe?"

"Maybe in Athens or London," I replied. "It'll depend on the timing. Paris is also possible because there's an émigré community there. But I don't want to take away time that the six of us are planning to spend together sightseeing and enjoying ourselves."

"I don't think anyone would object to you taking a morning out for church," Clarissa said. "I'd probably go, too, just to see what those churches are like."

"Let's worry about that when we're there," I replied. "We have a full agenda, and this may be the one and only time we get to Europe in our lives."

"You don't think you'll go again when you're a successful doctor?" Fran asked.

"A lot depends on how many kids we have, and when, and what the job allows. I'd like to think we'd have a chance to go again, but I'm not going to make any assumptions. That's why we're seeing as much as we can by visiting Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid, Rome, Athens, Vienna, Geneva, Munich, Copenhagen, and London."

"Did you guys decide what to do about a wedding?" Sandy asked Fran.

"Given that the only income we're going to have is Jason's stipend for being a teaching assistant, finances are a real concern. I don't think we can afford an apartment, but we could manage living in the married dorms here because Jason can borrow enough to cover tuition and room and board. You know I'm borrowing some for medical school, and my parents are kicking in some. So it

turns out we'll probably get hitched sometime this Summer, mainly for practical reasons."

"You two have effectively been married since Sophomore year!" Sandy said with a soft laugh. "A piece of paper might matter to the university, but that's about it."

"And my parents!" she said. "They haven't given me any real grief because they know Jason and I are going to marry, but they're old-fashioned about marriage. They officially don't know that I pretty much never use my dorm room."

"Life would be so much easier if they just allowed unmarried couples into the married dorms," Sandy replied.

"But think what happens if a couple breaks up," I countered. "Granted, that happens with married couples, but in those cases, you usually have some kind of divorce decree or separation agreement or whatever. If it's just two people living together, that could put the university in the position of having to intervene in a relationship dispute that isn't easily solved by swapping roommates."

"Now THERE is an interesting idea," Sandy said with a smirk.

"I'm sure if you talked to Derek, he'd be happy to take you up on that," I chuckled. "Though Pete might have an issue."

"Things are a bit different from Sophomore year!" she replied.

"Clarissa, what are you doing?" Fran asked.

"Moving in with Abby as soon as we graduate. She has a nice apartment with lots of room, and it even has a fireplace."

"I know you can't get married, but is it that serious?"

Clarissa smiled, "I think so, and so does she."

"Sandy?" Fran asked.

"Just shacking up with Pete and living in sin! We're pretty sure, but he hasn't asked, and I'm not quite ready to say 'yes' to anyone. If he asked, I'd probably say 'yes', but I'd prefer he not ask until some point in the future."

Pete and Jason came into the room just then, followed almost immediately by Sophia, Robby, and Lee. We hung out together until lunch, then joined the rest of the gang in the cafeteria. When we returned from lunch, there was a message on my board that Father Stephen had called, but we'd stayed in the cafeteria long enough that we had to leave for our biology stats class right away, and that meant not returning the call until after Doctor Blahnik's class unless I wanted to be late to stats. The message didn't say urgent, so I left it on the board as a reminder and headed to class with Clarissa.

"Something has changed," Clarissa said as we walked from the dorm to the science building. "In the past, you would have made the call and been late to class."

"I'm sure it's about Angie, and if I felt there was something I could do immediately, or if she and I were a couple, I'd have made the call. If it were about you, or Jocelyn, or one of my other close friends, I'd have made the call. But I've come to terms with the situation with Angie, and there is, at this point, literally nothing I can do to help her unless her doctors ask me to. And let's be honest -- based on what Doctor Hoffman, Doctor Mercer, and Father Stephen have said, it's unlikely I can do more good than harm. So it can wait a few hours. Also, if the message had said 'urgent', I'd have called."

"It's weird because it almost feels like you're abandoning her, but I know that's not your intent."

"You've hit my feelings on the nose," I replied with a deep sigh. "I feel that way, but I know that right now, the best thing I can do is pray, 'Lord have mercy!' and hope the doctors find a way to help her live a somewhat normal life, or at least what passes for normal for someone with her illness."

"What would you have done had this not manifested itself until after you married?"

"Fulfilled my commitment to her in the best way I was able to do so. The hard lesson I learned with Jocelyn was about keeping commitments."

"But you hadn't committed anything."

"What exactly do you think our trip to Cincinnati was, if not a commitment? Jocelyn's behavior after the accident confirms that she felt it was a commitment as well. If we were just two kids who wanted to fuck each other silly, the way Tasha and I were, then Jocelyn wouldn't have felt the need to lie to me about her condition. The problem was neither of us fully understood what we were getting into. I *thought* I did, but I didn't. She *thought* she did, but she didn't."

"What I've learned from what happened to Angie is that even slightly different behavior on her part could have led to a commitment to her. There's a good chance we'd never have been able to have kids, and I might have ended up married and celibate. And I would have accepted that, even if it were very difficult. With Jocelyn, I realize now that there was no guarantee that we could have biological children even without the accident. That could happen with Elizaveta. It was a foolish fiction of my own making that said it made a difference."

"That's quite the revelation," Clarissa said.

"Yes, but it shouldn't be a complete surprise, given everything you and I have discussed."

"No, it's just that I'm realizing just how different you are from the Petrovich I met nearly four years ago."

"You've changed, too, Lissa; we all have."

"And how is it that your betrothed seems more mature than all of us who are quite a bit older?"

"She has her 'little girl' moments," I chuckled, "but having a naturally conservative personality combined with a clear picture for her future and a solid upbringing in the church, you get what passes, at least on the surface, for maturity. Don't get me wrong, I believe she's mature enough to make the decision she's making, but I think the combination of nature and nurture has created a proper young lady who is very determined to see her vision of the future fulfilled but within the limits set by the Church."

"You were raised the same way."

I nodded, "But I allowed my desires to overwhelm my understanding of how I was supposed to behave. She hasn't."

"Because you won't let it happen!" Clarissa said with a soft laugh. "The same was true with Tasha until she literally demanded you take her to bed! The only thing preventing your *pussy* cat from doing the same thing is that you can put her off until the end of May!"

"Perhaps," I grinned.

We arrived in the classroom and took our seats for the class, which began a couple of minutes later. Fifty minutes later, we left the science building for the Humanities Building. Five minutes later, we were seated and waiting for Doctor Blahnik to begin her lecture. We were reading *Lolita*, and the lecture and discussion were about personality traits, specifically obsession on the part of Humbert Humbert. At several points during the lecture and discussion, Clarissa smirked and nudged me, but I refused to let her bait me into a response in front of Doctor Blahnik and the rest of the class.

"You're just no fun anymore, Petrovich!" Clarissa declared when we left the classroom.

"I've learned to ignore you the way I ignored Liz!" I chuckled. "And besides, Elizaveta is several years older, and I *objected* to a younger girl until my betrothed basically bullied me into considering her!"

Clarissa laughed, "Bullied by a fifteen-year-old! Wow!"

"I'll also point out, Lissa, that the only person who seems to be obsessing over her pussy is YOU!"

Clarissa laughed harder, "I'm just yanking your chain, Petrovich!"

"I know. And I can yank right back!"

We headed back to the dorm and I placed my call to Father Stephen.

"How are you, Subdeacon Michael?"

"I'm doing well, Father. I assume you called about Angie?"

"Yes. They think she'll be ready to go home next week. They've made some progress with getting her to take her medication and follow the doctors' orders."

"That's good to hear," I replied.

"She'll be in a very controlled setting. Basically, her mom or dad has to be with her at all times. She'll come to church and perhaps go to the park, but beyond that, it's all about baby steps to see if she can reintegrate. Her job is there for her, if she can get to a point where she can function well enough to do it."

"That's great news," I replied.

"One thing the doctors said most emphatically is that they do not want you to invite her to your wedding. They don't believe she could handle the stress."

"I sort of assumed that would be the case."

"We're concerned she might call you and ask to be invited."

"And what am I supposed to say to THAT request?" I asked.

"Tell her that it's up to me, please. The only way she could get there is if someone were to drive her, and that won't happen."

"I wouldn't count on that," I replied. "We know she drove without permission before, and there are buses that come here from Cincinnati along Route 50."

"I'll make sure I speak to her mother about that. Keep praying for her, Mike."

"I will. Thanks for calling to let me know."

"You're welcome."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then invited Jocelyn and Clarissa into the room.

"She might be home next week," I said. "But it'll be a very controlled environment until they're sure they can trust her to follow her doctors' orders. Father Stephen says they're worried she might try to come to my wedding, and they feel the stress that would cause would be tremendous. I agree."

"Won't preventing her from attending potentially set her off again?"

"Damned if you do; damned if you don't," I replied with a sigh. "All I can do is say 'Lord have mercy!' and keep praying for her."



March 23, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, José and I went to the Humanities Building and opened the music classroom, which I used for my lessons, with a key Doctor Blahnik had lent me. Five minutes later, our two potential bandmates arrived.

"Mike," José said, "this is Randy, better known as 'Sticks'. He's the drummer. Sticks, Mike."

I shook hands with the 6'2" black man who was built like a linebacker.

"Bad knees," he said. "I played through Junior year in High School."

"How did you know what I was thinking?" I asked.

"It's the same thing EVERYONE thinks! I'm built to play football, except for my knees."

"Philosophy major, right?"

"Yes, with a minor in physical education. I can't play, so I'd like to coach either High School or College. College would be better because I could teach ethics and work on my PhD."

"Cool."

"Mike, meet Kim; Kim, Mike."

I shook hands with the very cute Oriental girl who had long black hair and brown eyes.

"Nice to meet you, too," I replied. "You come highly recommended by Doctor Blahnik."

"So do you!" she replied.

"Thanks. José, what's the plan?"

"I figure we'll play a few songs together and see how we gel. I can back you on *Born to Run*. Then we can try *Piano Man* with you singing. I can play harmonica for that one. And finally, *It's Still Rock and Roll to Me* with me playing lead and you singing. Kim and Sticks know all three songs."

"This ought to be interesting," I chuckled.

"You've played with Milena accompanying you, right?" Kim asked.

"Yes, but never with percussion or in an ensemble like this. I take it you have?"

"I was in the concert band in High School," Sticks said.

"I played in a band with some friends in Akron," Kim added. "You can do this. It'll take some practice, but we'll get it."

"Let's get set up," José said.

Ten minutes later, we were ready.

"If you mess up, just keep playing," Kim said. "Don't worry if it sounds bad. Nobody will hear us but us, and if there's one place to mess up, it's here!"

"Mike, *Born to Run* is your baby, so you lead off, and we'll follow," José said.

I did, and I lost count of the mistakes we made during the first stanza. I just rolled with the mistakes, both mine and theirs, and we played all the way through.

"OK, the guitar solo was perfect," Kim said, "but the rest? We're going to need a LOT of practice."

"Let's try the other two songs," José suggested.

We did better, much better, actually, with *Piano Man*, but *It's Still Rock and Roll to Me* was pretty ragged.

"Believe it or not, that was pretty typical for a first time," Kim said. "You know, clumsy, fumbling, and unsure of what to do next!"

We all laughed.

"My girlfriend and I were total nerds," I said. "Not long after graduation, she read a book, and we discussed the mechanics and what to do in advance."

The other three laughed.

"Cast party when I was sixteen," Kim said. "Fumbling, clumsy, and short! We figured it out later!"

"A very experienced girl!" José declared. "She knew exactly what to do, and I was along for the ride, so to speak!"

More laughter.

"Similar to Kim," Sticks said. "Cheerleader who came to cheer me up after I blew out my knee. I figured it out by the fourth time that night!"

We all laughed again.

"Shall we run through the songs once more?" José suggested.

"Sure," I agreed, as did Kim and Sticks.

We did better the second time through, though we still had a long way to go.

"So, what do you all think?" José asked.

"You know my situation," I said. "Practice time is going to be at a premium, and my schedule isn't going to be up to me, really."

"I'm game!" Kim said.

"I'll give it a go," Sticks said.

"OK," José said. "Let me work out some possible practice times with Mike, and then I'll run it by the two of you. If there are times you absolutely can't practice, tell me now, please."

Kim and Sticks gave him some times they weren't available, and then the four of us left the music room. José and I headed back to my room to talk about possible practice times. For me, we agreed on Saturday mornings, at least for the rest of the semester, with a plan to revisit the schedule once I returned from Europe.

"Ready to study for mid-terms?" Clarissa asked, coming into my room.

"We just finished," José said. "He's all yours!"

"Not ALL of him!" Clarissa exclaimed. "Elizaveta has dibs on certain parts!"

"The fun parts!" Sandy declared, coming into the room.

"You only want me for my body!" I grinned.

"Duh!" Sandy laughed. "That was the deal! Stress relief!"

"True. Is Fran joining us?"

"She'll be here in a minute."

Fran walked in just under a minute later, and we pulled out our Physical Chemistry text and notes and began studying for the Monday mid-term. Clarissa and I only had two midterms -- chemistry and biology stats, but we had to finish our papers for Abnormal Psych and Russian Literature by Friday. My papers were basically done, and they just needed proofreading and perhaps a few

tweaks. I'd broken down and taken Kristin's advice to use *MacWrite* to create the papers, and I had to admit, in the end, that it had saved a tremendous amount of time.

"I'm getting REALLY tired of balancing reactions," Fran declared in frustration after about an hour.

"Look at it this way," Sandy replied, "this is the last time you'll ever have to do it!"

"She's right," Clarissa said. "We'll have a couple of biochemistry courses, but nothing like this."

"Thank God!" Fran exclaimed. "I can't wait to actually do practical, hands-on learning!"

"Two years, basically," I said. "Other than learning to do basic exams and take medical histories, it's almost all classwork the first two years. Then it gets real!"

"Including delivering babies"! Clarissa said. "When you do your OB/GYN rotation, you'll deliver babies!"

"That is going to be supremely weird," I said. "But cool, too."

"That was your reaction to seeing April nurse her baby," Clarissa said.

I nodded, "It was. That was the weirdest and coolest thing I'd ever seen. And delivering a baby is going to make that pale by comparison."

"Mike, can we go over these balancing equations once more?" Fran asked.

"Absolutely."

We studied for the rest of the morning, broke for lunch, and then Clarissa and I went to the computer lab to work on our papers. I'd agreed with Elizaveta that we'd skip our usual Saturday lunch so I could study but that we'd have our Sunday afternoon with Tasha, Nik, Alyssa, and Mark, though we'd eat a bit earlier than usual so I could get back to campus for a final study session before the Monday exam.

"Talk about major changes," Clarissa teased when I inserted the floppy disk which held my papers into the Macintosh computer.

"Just because I'm using a computer doesn't mean I've changed my opinion of computers!"

"But I bet you've decided it's a good thing that Elizaveta asked her dad to get her a computer. It's WAY better than using a typewriter."

"True," I agreed grudgingly.

"Come on, Mike, computers are just a tool, like a scalpel. You know how to use them. That's WAY different from programming. I get you don't like that; I didn't particularly like it, either. But we're not going to have to program anything, just use things like *MacWrite*, and probably, at some point, some kind of program which tracks medical histories, and so on. Think about how computers could be used to correlate symptoms and diagnoses! Again, you'll just have to USE it, not program it."

"May I please have my bad attitude about computers?"

"No!" Clarissa exclaimed. "I figured Kristin would have cured you of that!"

"We didn't use a computer for that," I replied deadpan.

Clarissa laughed, "I would hope not!"

"I do suppose I should just dissolve the mental block."

"Yes, you should!"

We both finished our papers, then headed back to the dorm so I could get ready for church.



March 27, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Halfway there!" Clarissa declared happily on Wednesday when we walked out of the classroom after the biology stats midterm.

"I have no clue why you're so excited," Sandy said with a shake of her head. "In August, we start a 51-week year; then three 52-week years; then Residency. I wouldn't even say graduation is 'halfway there!'"

"Wow! When did you get so down?" Fran asked.

"Too much studying; not enough sex," I teased.

"We haven't had to study very much this semester!" Fran declared. "Mostly, it's about writing lab reports and doing homework!"

"Equation balancing?"

"Oh, shut up!" Fran ordered, but she was laughing. "I am SO glad we're done with that!"

"Until the final," Clarissa added.

"Oh, sure, ruin my good mood!" Fran grouched.

"And I'm getting PLENTY of sex!" Sandy declared happily.

When we arrived at the dorm, there was a message for me saying that Father Stephen had called. I excused myself to return the call.

"Angie was able to go home this morning," he said. "And she'll be at church tonight for the Vespers Divine Liturgy, according to her mom."

"Good," I replied. "Thanks for letting me know."

"Doctor Hoffman asked that you please call her or Doctor Mercer if Angie tries to get in touch with you."

"I'll do that," I promised. "And I'll continue to pray for her."

"Living by prayer is a good thing, Subdeacon."

"Father Nicholas has given me a fairly extensive prayer rule."

Father Stephen laughed softly, "Something I recommend for all our college students. It's much better to live by prayer than fall to the temptations of the flesh."

"Yes, it is."

"If you need anything, please call me."

"Thanks, Father."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, happy that Angie was home but fearing what might happen next.

LV. Challenge Accepted!

March 28, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday, after my lesson with Doctor Blahnik, I met with Mark and Alyssa for our final catechism class. We finished reviewing the Nicene Creed and then went over the baptismal rite to ensure they knew exactly what would happen on Holy Saturday morning.

"Seriously?" Mark asked. "A horse trough?"

"It's painted gold with three-bar crosses on each side," I offered. "The only other options are a river or a lake. We could probably arrange that, if you felt it was important."

"No," he replied. "I was just surprised. I guess it makes sense because you need something large enough for an adult, and the baptismal font is designed for babies."

"Yes. And remember that you should fast from the end of Vespers on Holy Friday, which is the second-to-last service that day. I understand from Father Nicholas that he instructed you to eat a good breakfast on Friday morning, then have a light lunch. Did you work out with your school to have the day off?"

"Yes. The principal said that because they give Good Friday off, they'll allow us the day without marking us absent, so we'll still have perfect attendance. We just have to make up any work. There are no quizzes or tests, so it's basically just making sure we get the homework assignments. We both have friends who will get them for us for each class."

"Good. Any other questions about the baptismal rite?"

"No," Alyssa replied, and Mark confirmed by shaking his head.

"OK, then, about receiving the Eucharist. You two will be first in line, as there are no other baptisms that day, because I don't think Mrs. Bentzinger will have her baby in the next couple of days. Anyway, just cross your arms over your chest, right over left, tilt your head back, open your mouth, and allow Father to serve you the Eucharist from the spoon. The spoon won't touch your mouth -- he'll just pour the Eucharist in. Then wipe your lips on the red cloth being held under your chin and kiss the base of the chalice. Then move to your left, take some of the blessed bread, and drink a sip of warm wine to wash it down. If you want, you can take that *antidoron* to your parents. It's not Eucharist, but it allows them to share in the «agápē» meal."

"I'm not sure mine will take it," Mark said. "Though I'm sure Alyssa's will."

"I think they're going to talk to Father Nicholas about becoming official catechumens," Alyssa said.

"That's great! Any fallout from your old church?"

"I think they're afraid of you!" Alyssa said with a soft laugh.

"I doubt that," I replied. "Tim Saddler was an unprepared lightweight. I am sure your Senior Pastor would have done a much better job. I'm not saying he could have won, but he sure wouldn't have lost quite so badly."

"All three of those guys who were arrested are back at church, according to my mom," Mark said.

"Normally, I'd say that's a good thing, but in this case, I think it just means they'll hear more of the same. In the end, what I care about is the safety of my friends, so hopefully, those three learned their lesson about acting on that teaching. Anyway, do you have any other questions about baptism or receiving the Eucharist?"

"How do I do a life confession?" Alyssa asked.

"I've never done one," I replied, "because I started going to confession when I was seven. I can only give you pointers; Father can answer any direct questions you might have. Basically, he does this as a conversation, and you should come prepared to discuss any areas where you've fallen short of living the Gospel. He's not going to ask for names or places or anything like that, but he will ask questions to be sure you've covered the major issues. And remember, the point is, you want to start with a 'clean slate', so to speak."

"What if we forget something?" Mark asked.

"The prayers make the point that forgetting is OK, so long as you aren't trying to deceive yourself."

"What about, uhm, making out?" Alyssa asked, blushing slightly.

"Kissing is generally OK, as is cuddling, hugging, or holding hands. Anything beyond that you should discuss with Father Nicholas."

"What happens if you commit a big sin?" she asked.

"It depends on the person and the sin," I replied. "Remember, confession is akin to going to the doctor. Sin is a symptom, and Father will provide guidance on how to deal with those symptoms. The actual disease, if you will, is mortality. Death is our true enemy, and the Eucharist is the medicine of immortality. The

doctor doesn't condemn you for an illness, though he might give you guidance on how to live a healthier life. That is exactly what confession is, and when combined with the Eucharist, it is for the healing of soul and body.

"As for what happens, most often Father Nicholas, like most priests, will adjust your prayer rule and your fasting rule, with the goal of you learning spiritual discipline. In some extreme instances, he might ask you to refrain from coming to the Eucharist. I've also known him to suggest outside counseling when necessary."

"Extreme cases?" Mark asked.

"Call it anything for which you could reasonably be sent to jail or something which might cause a scandal if it were known publicly. There are other things, such as being responsible for a death in combat, for example, which would lead to refraining from the Eucharist for a year. And before you ask any specifics, please don't because I can't answer. How Father Nicholas deals with each individual is directly related to what is necessary for their salvation. And I honestly do not need to hear anyone else's sins; I have sufficient sins of my own to deal with."

"That's something the elders and pastors at our old church would never admit publicly."

"We aren't Donatists -- clergy do not have to be sinless for the sacraments to be efficacious. When I objected to being ordained because of my sinful ways, the bishop pointed out that if that were a disqualification, we'd have no clergy. One important thing about that -- do not take that as a license to sin, nor should you view confession as a way to 'get away with it'."

"You mean like thinking it's OK to do something because you can go to confession later?" Alyssa asked.

"Exactly. Personally, I don't believe God accepts us trying to 'game the system', as it were. Also, remember that confession isn't meant to embarrass you. In fact, Father Nicholas has probably heard anything you're likely to confess before and likely on multiple occasions. And probably from the people you think are least likely to sin! But that's also not something you should worry about. Worry about your sins and being healed,^x and let others worry about theirs."

"What about accountability?" Mark asked. "Our old church had this thing called 'accountability partners'."

"In the Orthodox Church, that is first and foremost your pastor. It's also the role your godparents take on," I replied. "And each other, if you're in a relationship."

"How often are you supposed to go to confession?" Alyssa asked.

"I know it sounds trite, but as often as you need to. Some people go weekly; others go just once a year, during Holy Week. You should listen to your conscience. Father Nicholas will have some guidance for you based on where you're struggling. Anything else on confession?"

"No."

"Then make sure you speak with Doctor Evgeni and Maria about your Pascha basket. For this year, you might just share with them, though if your parents will be at Pascha, Alyssa, you might want to prepare one for the two of you and your parents. Mark, are your parents coming to your baptism?"

"Yes. I invited them to the other services, but I doubt they'll come."

"Don't push," I counseled. "Just witness by your life and see where things go. I'll see you tomorrow night at church."

"Can I ask why you haven't been coming to the Friday Compline and Akathist services?" Alyssa asked.

I nodded, "Yes. Father Nicholas felt it was better for Elizaveta and me to spend time together, given that it was our only possible date night. We decided that we'll go tomorrow, as it's the last one before Holy Week starts. A week from tomorrow are the Vespers and Compline for Saint Lazarus. So, if there's nothing else, then I'll see you tomorrow night!"

They said 'goodbye', and after they left, I practiced with the balalaika for about an hour, then headed back to campus to have dinner with the gang.



March 29, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday, we had no exams, so I drove to Elizaveta's house to meet her when she arrived home from school. I had just parked in the driveway when the bus dropped her off, and I got out quickly so we could hug. She hurried to me, we hugged, and I took her book bag from her and followed her into the house.

"How was school today?" I asked.

"Just another day. I need to go upstairs and change. You can wait in the great room. Mom is home, but nobody else."

"OK."

She went upstairs, and rather than go to the great room, I went to find Yulia Kozlov, who was putting bread in the oven for dinner.

"Hi, Mom," I said.

She laughed, "Not quite yet, but thank you! How are you, Mike?"

"Good. I figure if Elizaveta is calling me 'husband' then I should be OK calling you 'Mom!'"

"Of course! Just don't take that 'husband' bit TOO far before the end of May."

"I believe that goes without saying, but I understand the reminder."

She smiled, "I know all about being a teenager. It may have been a few years, but I do remember!"

"What year did you marry?" I asked.

"June of 1961. Gennady was born just under two years later. Iosif two years after him, and then there's a gap of about five years to our little surprise!"

I chuckled, "Babies have a way of doing that, don't they?"

"To be honest, we had tried and, after four years, assumed we weren't going to be able to have another. About two months after we gave up hope, I was pregnant with Elizaveta."

"I think the phrase is 'God works in mysterious ways!' And I'm not about to complain about the sequence of events!"

"I should think not!" she replied with a soft laugh. "We'll have dinner in time for you two to get to church for Compline."

"Thanks."

"Mike?" I heard Elizaveta call out.

"My master's voice," I said in a conspiratorial way.

Yulia winked, "And she won't let you forget it!"

I left the kitchen and met Elizaveta walking towards me.

"I was just saying 'Hi' to your mom."

"What did you do today?"

"Just turned in my papers for Abnormal Psych and Russian Literature, then hung out with whoever wasn't sitting for an exam."

"Peter Systov agreed to be our DJ. Dad worked out how much to pay him, and he's happy. He does want to borrow some of your albums."

"I think I might have to make a list because neither of you can come into my room to see the collection."

"That's just SO dumb! It's a special occasion!"

"Maybe I can move most of the collection to the cottage," I said. "I can keep a dozen albums and my new CDs and swap them out to keep from hearing the same stuff too often."

"Are you sure?"

"It's only eight weeks," I replied.

"Fifty-eight days!" Elizaveta declared.

"Fine, eight weeks and two days! But it'll be OK. And if I buy new stuff on CDs, then there won't be any concerns at all. Well, except for not being able to play those songs at the wedding, but that's not really a big deal. I'll get the guys to help me box everything up and bring them down to my car next Saturday."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

"Can I come to your band practice tomorrow morning? Dad said he'd bring me to campus, and you can bring me home."

"Is that a question or a command?" I asked with a silly smile.

"I asked, didn't I?" Elizaveta protested.

"After already having talked to your dad and presenting it to me as a *fait accompli*!"

"Are you upset with me?" she asked quietly.

I chuckled, "No, I'm just teasing you! Of course, it's OK. 10:00am in the Humanities Building, which is just past the Administration building. The music room is on the first floor."

"Thanks. Do you think I order you around?"

I smiled, "Only with regard to marrying you! And that was probably necessary because I was a total blockhead!"

"Probably?"

"Definitely."

"I don't want to control you, Mike."

"Said no Russian woman EVER in the history of the world!" I teased.

"I just said it!" Elizaveta protested.

"You are very easy to wind up!" I chuckled.

She narrowed her eyes, "Why are you teasing me?"

"Because I can?" I replied with a smile. "But seriously, if it really bothers you, I'll stop."

Elizaveta smirked, "Got you!"

"So you DO want to control me?"

"I do happen to be a Russian woman!" she said mirthfully. "But I think you'll like the benefits that come with marrying me!"

"I'm sure you're right!" I agreed.



March 30, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Kim, Sticks, this is Elizaveta, my fiancée," I said when she walked into the music room on Saturday morning.

"Fiancée?" Kim asked, clearly surprised.

"We're going to marry on May 26th," Elizaveta said.

"You look really young for your age!" Kim said.

"I AM young!" Elizaveta replied. "I turn sixteen in about three weeks."

"Whoa!" Kim exclaimed.

"Robbing the cradle?" Sticks teased.

"Careful!" José warned with a big smile on his face, "She's Russian. You do NOT want to mess with her!"

"Let's just play," I said with a grin. "If she makes the same argument to you that she made to me, we won't get any practice in this morning!"

"Where should I sit, Mike?" Elizaveta asked.

"Anywhere you like," I said.

She sat down, and I unpacked my guitar and music.

"Let's play through our three songs a couple of times each," José directed, "and then we can talk about what kind of songs we'd want in our sets."

Everyone agreed, so we did as he suggested and played through the three songs -- *Born to Run*, *Piano Man*, and *It's Still Rock and Roll to Me* -- twice each. We were getting better, but there were still mistakes.

"You know," I said, "it might not be a bad idea to ask Doctor Blahnik to listen to us and give some advice. I'll talk to her, if that's OK."

"That's probably not a bad idea," José agreed. "Any ideas what songs all of you would like to sing?"

"I think I almost have to do *In the Air Tonight* by Phil Collins," Sticks said. "The drum break near the end is just out of this world!"

"Well, if that's how we're going to roll," Kim said, "I have to do *Great Balls of Fire!* I could do it either on keyboards or with an actual piano."

"Then I think *Born to Run* is my song for the guitar riff," I said.

"Given Mike's aversion to ABBA, which I know you other two share, I'll go with *You Are So Beautiful* by Joe Cocker."

"Nah, Man," Sticks said, "if it's your song, it should be what you want, right guys?"

"Yes," Kim said.

"I think that's right," I added.

He grinned, "Maybe I should sing *Does Your Mother Know* for Mike and Elizaveta," he teased.

"Her mom knows," I chuckled.

"What?!" Elizaveta exclaimed.

"Later, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I said. ("Kitten")

She gave me 'that look' with narrowed eyes but didn't say anything more.

"I was actually joking about ABBA because pretty much all the songs are written for a female lead. I'll stick with *You Are So Beautiful*. I've been playing that for Dona."

"OK," Kim said. "If we're laying out sets, I'd say those four songs are sung right before the last song of our second set, and I have a suggestion for our closing number -- *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen."

"That seems like a serious stretch," I said.

"We're not planning on playing in public anytime soon, right? I mean, the earliest would be sometime in the Fall?"

"Given my schedule, yes."

"Then I'd like to do that," Kim said firmly. "In fact, I'm getting a picture of how we do this. We start off with *I Write the Songs* and close the first set with *Piano Man*. We open the second set with *I've Got the Music in Me* by The Kiki Dee Band, finish with our individual songs and *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and our encores are *It's Still Rock and Roll to Me* and *Thank You For the Music*. That all hangs together with a theme. We can pick pretty much any songs to fill out the playlist."

"Mike, could you play *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*?" Sticks asked. "That would be a great song for the first set."

"I don't have the tabs or music for it, but I'm sure I could learn it," I replied.

"I think this theme is cool," Sticks continued. "How about adding *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts?"

There were nods of agreement.

"Maybe *Listen to the Music* by the Doobie Brothers?" José suggested.

"Hang on," Kim said. "Let me get my notebook and write these down. I'll put together a sample set list."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a tattered blue notebook, opened to a clean page, and wrote down the songs.

"*Old Time Rock and Roll*, by Bob Seger," Sticks suggested.

"How about *Radio Ga Ga*?" I suggested. "And maybe *Video Killed the Radio Star*?"

"If you guys are up for AC/DC, we have *Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution*," Kim suggested.

"Are we going to be able to learn all of these songs?" I asked.

"Mike, you practice your guitar every day, right?" José asked.

"Mostly, yes."

"Then you practice these. If you're playing rhythm guitar, once you get them down, most of the work is on us. You could even record your practice sessions, and we could use those if you aren't available."

"I suppose," I said.

"You should do it, Mike," Elizaveta said. "It'll be a good way to get your mind off school, which I think you'll need to, so you don't get too stressed."

"I thought that was why I was marrying you!" I teased.

"Behave!" she said sternly, but with a slight smile and a twinkle in her eye.

"Yes, Dear," I deadpanned.

"We need to do *The Entertainer* by Billy Joel for sure," José said. "Mike knows that one."

"I've heard him," Kim said. "I agree."

"*We Will Rock You* by Queen," Sticks suggested. "A great song would be *American Pie*, but I think it's way too long at eight-and-a-half minutes."

"I have all of those down," Kim said. "Let me work up the playlists for the two sets and bring them next Saturday."

"No practice next Saturday," I said. "I have church in the morning."

"You have church morning, noon, and night for more than a week, starting on Friday evening!" José said.

"True," I agreed. "That goes for the following Saturday as well."

"What church?" Kim asked.

"Saint Michael the Archangel Orthodox Church," I said. "Elizaveta and I are Russian Orthodox, and our Holy Week starts this coming Friday."

"You don't have Easter next Sunday?" Sticks asked.

"No, it's the following Sunday. Depending on the year, it's one, two, or five weeks after Western Easter, though occasionally it's the same day. To make a long story short, there were two basic ways of reckoning the date, and we use the more traditional one. Anyway, there are church services this coming Saturday and the following Saturday, and I'm also not going to have much time to practice, even privately, during Holy Week."

"OK. Then we'll plan to meet three weeks from today," Kim said. "I'll drop off a copy of the proposed playlist sometime during the week so you can get the music."

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

"So we're all in for this?" José asked.

"I'm in for sure!" Kim said.

"Same here," Sticks agreed.

"With my caveats about practice time, yes," I said.

"Then we'll be back here on April 20th!"

Which was Elizaveta's birthday, but I didn't think a couple of hours of band practice on Saturday morning was going to be an issue. I looked over to her, and she didn't seem to be reacting negatively, so I nodded in agreement. I packed up my things, and once everyone had left the music room, I locked the door.

"Mike," Elizaveta asked, "not to rain on your parade, but have you talked to the bishop about being in a band once you're ordained?"

"No," I replied. "I suppose I should do that right away. I didn't even think about it. There are canons against actors being clergy, but none against musicians, at least as far as I've read."

"Actors?"

I chuckled, "Thespians have been libertine since ancient times!"

"What was that comment about my mom?"

"When I greeted her yesterday afternoon, I playfully called her 'Mom', and she thanked me but said it wasn't quite time to do that. I pointed out that if you called me 'husband', I should be able to call her 'Mom'. She reminded me not to take that TOO literally before the end of May."

"WHAT?!" Elizaveta exclaimed in outrage.

"Relax, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I soothed. "She pointed out that she was a teenager once, and she remembers what it's like. And I'm sure she knows that we're both very attracted to each other." ("Kitten")

"But still!" she protested.

"Don't you think every person on the planet knows what we plan to do on our wedding night?"

"Obviously! All night!"

"And don't you think they also know that temptation is a given?"

"Yes, but..."

"But what? All your mom did was remind me of something you and I agreed, and something I promised Father Nicholas."

"It's OUR business!" she declared.

"It is, but I'll also remind you that until your birthday, I could go to jail."

"Talk about dumb!"

"I agree. But there is one thing to remember."

"What's that?"

"In fifty-seven days, we can do it until you can't walk, talk, or even move, and nobody can tell us 'no'."

Elizaveta blushed, then whispered fiercely, "We'll just see who it is who can't get out of bed the next morning!"

I chuckled, "Challenge accepted!"

When we got to the dorm, Elizaveta fumed at having to wait in the lobby, but I wasn't interested in creating ANY problems with less than two months to go before graduation. I took my guitar upstairs, then came back down so we could drive to her house, where we spent the afternoon and, after dinner, headed to Vespers.

"Father, Bless," I said when I walked into the narthex with Elizaveta.

He gave his blessing, and I kissed his hand, then Elizaveta asked for and received a blessing.

"Father, I should have asked you about this a few weeks ago, but is there a problem with me playing in a band once I'm ordained?"

"A band like Kiss or a band like the early Beatles?"

"More like the latter," I replied with a grin.

"What will you sing?"

"Covers of songs from the 60s, 70s, and 80s."

"Dressed properly?"

"Nothing like Kiss, or like ABBA when they sang *Waterloo* for the song contest that made them popular!"

Father Nicholas laughed, "Those were pretty outrageous but also modest."

"Do I need to talk to Vladyka ARKADY about this?"

"Let me ask him. I can't imagine he'll object, so long as your performances are modest."

"Just four kids singing together. Given our name choices, I'll probably wear scrubs when I play."

"What names?" Father Nicholas asked.

"The two leading names are 'Trauma Team' and 'Code Blue', though our keyboard player suggested 'Hypo-dermic'."

"Where would you be playing?"

"We haven't got that far just yet," I said. "We've only met twice, and obviously, I'm not going to be available for the next two Saturdays, and then with the wedding and our trip to Europe, I won't have a lot of time until late Summer. I'd guess we'd play at the university and maybe for the med school. Beyond that, who knows? And it's not even close to a done deal."

"I'll run it by His Grace, but I don't think there will be an issue."

"Thanks, Father."



April 2, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday afternoon, I walked to the rectory of Saint Augustine Catholic Church to see Father Jacobs.

"«Salve», Mike!" he exclaimed when his secretary ushered me into his office.

"Good afternoon, Father," I replied.

"Two semesters of Latin, and I get 'Good afternoon, Father'?" he asked with an arched eyebrow.

"«Salve, Reverende Pater»!" I replied with a grin.

"Would you like something to drink? I'm about to have tea."

"Tea is perfect," I said.

"Have a seat, please."

I sat down in one of the very nice leather wingback chairs while Father Jacobs asked his secretary to bring in the tea and two cups. He sat down in an identical chair, which was angled so we could see each other while we talked. The secretary brought in a teapot and two cups, poured for both of us and then withdrew, closing the double doors behind her.

"I'm glad you came to say 'hello'," he said.

"When I heard you were being reassigned, I thought I should come by and see you. I very much enjoyed your classes, and I'm sorry your patriarch feels it necessary to move you around!"

He laughed softly, "I think you might be the only person I know who refers to His Holiness as 'patriarch'! Even Father Nicholas doesn't."

"Technically, he's not because of the schism, but I think we'll leave that debate for our bishops!"

"Wise! I hear you're engaged?"

"Yes, and I'd like to see you at our wedding. I have an invitation for you."

"Thank you! And your marriage is in advance of your ordination?"

"The alternative is something I do not want to contemplate! No offense intended!"

Father Jacobs laughed, "None taken. I knew the rules when I enrolled in seminary. You know your rules, and you're working within them!"

"Why do your bishops move priests from parish to parish?" I asked.

"Why does the military move officers from base to base?" he asked.

I nodded, "Because their skills are needed elsewhere. It also allows for career growth, but I'm not sure what that means in Roman Catholic terms."

"Spiritual growth, perhaps?" Father Jacobs suggested.

"That makes sense. Yours? Or the congregation's?"

"Both, hopefully. I'm going to a parish where the pastor is retiring, and the bishop needs someone with my particular skills, so he's assigned me there. It's a bit easier without a family. I simply move from this rectory to another."

"Please excuse the bit of impertinence, but our bishops don't move priests except *in extremis* because it's against the canons. In a situation where there was some kind of problem or scandal, they'd often send a retired priest as pastor and a recent seminary graduate as an assistant, though he'd take on most of the pastoral duties while the retired priest would focus on fixing the problems."

"Don't worry about offending me with your rigorism," Father Jacobs said with a smile.

I laughed, "Yeah, and I'm totally mellow compared to some of the Greek Old Calendarists or even ROCOR."

"We have our hardcore believers as well. I think it's a common theme throughout all faiths."

I nodded, "Going back to the ordination, you're welcome to attend if it's permitted, and you're able to miss a Sunday."

"Which day is that?"

"July 28th."

"There are no restrictions which would keep me from attending, so long as your bishop doesn't object."

"I can't imagine he would, given our parishes cooperate on things like the food bank and the women's shelter, with his blessing."

"Please verify, just to be sure."

"I'll ask Father Nicholas because, technically, it would be his invitation on behalf of the bishop to a brother clergyman."

"But a schismatic one?" he asked with a smile and an arched eyebrow.

"So the bishops have said, but that's not between you and me, really."

"No, of course not! I just like to yank your chain a bit because you are so deeply steeped in the faith and the history of the Church that you know where the bodies are buried, so to speak."

"There is no body! That's the entire basis of the faith!"

"True!" Father Jacobs replied with a laugh. "You're a week behind us this year, right?"

"Or you're a week early, but yes."

"On another topic," he said with a smile, "did you know that there's a Ruthenian bishop in Cincinnati?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"There was some controversy because of the way changes decreed at Vatican II were implemented in the Byzantine Catholic Church, so Archbishop Elko was sent to Rome for a decade and returned later as a Latin-rite Auxiliary Archbishop in Cincinnati."

"From the churches which didn't return to the Orthodox fold with Alexis Toth," I replied with a smile. "And those churches returned to Orthodoxy because one of your bishops objected to ethnic parishes."

"Not our finest hour, that's for sure."

"I'm positive Father Alexis will be glorified a saint at some point in the not-too-distant future," I said. "After all, he rejected the Union of Brest and returned to the faith of his fathers."

"You would see it that way!" Father Jacobs said lightly. "We might have a differing opinion."

"You think?" I asked with a broad smile. "Who will be the new priest here?"

"Father Walter Clifton. He's currently associate pastor at a church in Cincinnati. He's also about twenty years younger than I am. I'm having dinner with him and Father Nicholas to introduce them right before I leave."

"When is that?"

"My last Sunday here is August 25th. We're having dinner that evening. Father Clifton will concelebrate with me that day. You haven't met our deacon, have you?"

"No. I wasn't even aware you had one."

"Deacon Robert is a retired vintner."

"Ohio isn't exactly wine country!"

"He's from California. He retired here because his grandchildren are here and came to the vocation late in life. I believe you have the same thing with many of your deacons."

I nodded, "That's true. I'm one of the rare ones -- a young deacon who won't eventually be made a priest. My calling is to heal bodies, not souls."

"The diaconate is a calling to serve the parish, historically responsible for charity and catechism."

"Things which Father Nicholas has already assigned to me, with the blessing of Vladyka ARKADY."

"I'm really not surprised. It was difficult for Father Nicholas to lose his deacon and his friend."

"I hadn't even considered the friendship part," I replied.

"What? Clergy can't have friends?"

"Of course they can; I simply hadn't considered that they had that kind of relationship. I mostly only ever saw them in a liturgical or pastoral context."

"If there is one thing I've learned in thirty-seven years as a priest, it is that you should befriend your brother clergyman at every opportunity."

"Good advice, which I will put to use."

"I saw the announcement that you're giving the valedictory speech."

"I am. And I saw that the Most Reverend James Anthony Griffin, Bishop of Columbus, will be giving the invocation."

"Have you decided on a topic?"

"Love and growing up, at least as I've imagined it so far. While I won't recite it, I Corinthians 13 is the basis for the speech."

"Given you're going from High School to college graduation, marriage, ordination, and medical school in the space of four years, I'd say that's appropriate!"

"Who's going to teach Latin and World Religions next year?"

"They've just started looking for candidates. Normally, I would have told them sooner, but given I only found out about a month ago, they got started late in the process. You'd be a great choice for World Religions, but I believe you're otherwise engaged."

"I also don't have a Master's degree, and certainly don't have a PhD. I won't even have a PhD when I graduate from medical school -- that's an MD."

"I have the equivalent of a Doctor of Divinity. Did you know our bishop has a JD and is licensed to practice law?"

"No, I wasn't aware of that."

"Speaking of ordinations, may I ask, if I'm not out of line, why Bishop ARKADY granted you an exception for marriage after ordination to the subdiaconate?"

"Because he wanted to," I chuckled. "In all seriousness, he didn't give me a reason, though he did explain that he was granting «ekonomia» and felt it was appropriate as subdeacons are ordained outside the altar, unlike deacons and priests who are ordained inside the altar. I honestly do not know why he chose not to wait, and as far as I'm aware, there was no pressing need at the time, as Deacon Grigory's heart attack came after my ordination to the subdiaconate."

"You wouldn't have accepted monastic tonsure?"

"Not a chance," I chuckled.

"I would have said the same thing through most of High School, but the Holy Spirit was insistent that I was called to the priesthood."

"The bishop is insistent that I'm called to the diaconate! I never sought tonsuring as a reader or ordination as a subdeacon. I accepted those because His Grace asked. The same is true for my upcoming ordination. And honestly, my wedding. Elizaveta basically came to me and demanded I marry her."

Father Jacobs laughed, "There are some very headstrong women in your church!"

"No kidding!"

We both laughed, then finished our tea. Father Jacobs thanked me for visiting, we said 'goodbye', and I left the rectory to head back to campus.



April 4, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Ready to work on our chemistry lab?" Fran asked when she came to my room on Thursday morning.

"It's now or never," I replied. "Starting tomorrow evening, I'm in church pretty much non-stop. We'll need to do next week's lab report on Tuesday afternoon right after lunch."

"OK. Shall we head to the computer center?"

"I've spent WAY too much time there, but I have to say using *MacWrite* makes this a whole lot easier!"

"And I've gotten pretty good with *MacPaint*, doing the illustrations, though we don't have too many this semester in P-Chem."

"Just lots of equations!" I teased.

"Oh, shut up!"

I laughed, grabbed my things, and we headed to the computer center. Three hours later, completed reports in hand, we returned to the dorm to have lunch with the gang. After lunch, I had my guitar lesson, then went to Doctor Blahnik's house to practice the balalaika before heading back to the dorm earlier than usual because catechism had been completed the previous Thursday.

"Doing anything special tonight before it's 'all church, all the time'?" Clarissa asked.

"I didn't have any particular plans."

"Wanna go see *Desperately Seeking Susan*?"

"Just you and me?" I asked.

"No, I think Jocelyn, Robby, Lee, Sophia, and some others are up for it. Gene has some serious studying to do, and Fran and Jason are doing whatever it is married couples do when sex gets boring."

"I honestly don't see how that's possible," I replied.

"Because it's a low priority in your book. Even when you had girls throwing themselves at you, it was a low priority."

"I suppose. Do you think you'll find it boring being with one person for the rest of your life?"

Clarissa shrugged, "Who knows? But there are ways to spice things up. You're going to have a sauna and whirlpool in your house when you build one, right?"

"That is the plan."

"There's some variety right there!"

"And you?"

"There's a lot more cuddling and kissing than there is what you'd call 'sex'. That makes it different, I think."

"I'm curious, and you can refuse to answer, but do you guys use what are euphemistically called 'marital aids'?"

Clarissa laughed hard for a good minute, then asked, "You mean vibrators? Or dildos?"

"Yes."

"You can ask me anything, Petrovich. Yes, on the vibrator, no on the dildos. So, movie?"

"Sure. Are we eating in the cafeteria?"

"Yes. Most of us don't have extra money for a second or third night out, and we'll keep our usual Friday and Saturday activities while you're in church."

"Hmm. Pagan sex rituals?"

"The pagan gods do seem obsessed with sex!"

"Because PEOPLE are obsessed with sex!" I exclaimed.

"Except for you!"

"Oh, I think about it plenty. I just have to keep the motor in idle and the gearbox in neutral for another seven weeks or so."

"Let's go find the gang and get some dinner, then head to the movies. You can take your cold shower later!"

We left my room in search of the rest of our gang, and when we found them, we headed to dinner. After dinner, we saw the movie, and when we came back to the dorm, I said 'good night', said my prayers, and got into bed.

It was going to be a long nine days.

LVI. Holy Week and Pascha, Part I

April 5, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

When I got up on Friday morning, I ran, then said my morning prayers, including an additional petition, a very rare one for a very specific thing -- 'For a quiet and blessed Holy Week, Lord have mercy!'. Under normal circumstances, the only changes I made to my petitions were to add anyone who wasn't on my regular prayer list but who was struggling or suffering, but in this case, given everything else going on, a quiet and peaceful Holy Week was just what the doctor ordered.

"Morning, Mike!" Robby said when I opened the door to his knock. "Ready for breakfast?"

"I am," I replied.

I stepped out into the hall, closed the door behind me, and then joined the rest of the gang, who were waiting for the elevators to take us downstairs. Ten minutes later, all of us were sitting at our usual table with our breakfast.

"Can you believe we only have seven weeks until graduation?" Pete asked.

"No!" came a chorus from Fran, Jason, and Sandy.

"And then on to grad school or medical school for all of us!" Clarissa declared.

"Not until after a Summer of fun!" Sandy exclaimed. "But then...ugh. No time off for five or six years!"

"All you doctor types are insane," Larry said. "Ain't no two ways about that!"

"I'm not sure teaching High School is much better!" Sandy said, shaking her head.

"I get Summers off," he said. "So think about me being in Florida while you're emptying a bedpan or whatever it is medical students do!"

"It's mostly classroom and lab work for the first two years," Clarissa explained. "But the first year is 51 weeks, and then it's 52 weeks after that, with no breaks until a short one between graduation and our first PGY work."

"PGY?" Larry asked.

"Post Graduate Year," she replied. "It's the easiest way to refer to it because your program for Residency varies tremendously based on your choice of specialty. In some states, like Illinois, a PGY2 can be a GP, you know, a regular family doctor, or whatever. On the other extreme, it can be PGY7 or 8 before a surgeon is fully qualified and has completed their Fellowship."

"And you guys?"

"For me, with internal medicine, after PGY3, I'll be eligible to be hired as an Attending. The same is true for Mike, though given the changes that are happening in Emergency Medicine, he might need to do a couple of surgical rotations, which would make it PGY4 for him. Sandy, with pediatrics, can be an Attending after PGY3. Fran still hasn't made up her mind."

"I'm leaning towards cardiology," she said. "And an Attending position would be around PGY6 or 7. That said, OB/GYN is a good option and would only take four years."

"Sophia, you're still planning on OB/GYN, right?" Sandy asked.

"Yes, and that's four years, as Fran just said."

"Wait a minute! Mike can be an ER doc after three years, but you have to have four years to be an OB?" Dona asked. "How does that make sense?"

I chuckled, "Except in the most extreme cases, I'll call someone like Sophia to deliver the baby. My job will be to ensure patients survive long enough for the surgeons and others to work on them."

"You won't do surgery?"

"In the ER? At best, it would be procedures necessary to stop bleeding or whatever, but you want a full surgical team to do the actual surgery, not the ER doctors who don't have that as their specialty. But, as Clarissa said, things are changing, so I might end up doing more surgery than was done by ER docs in the past."

"Are you sure you'll Match?" Sarah asked.

"Emergency Medicine and Internal Medicine are way down the list of most med school graduates," I said. "If Clarissa and I put them at the top of our lists, we'll very likely get our first choice with regard to hospital. The toughest one to Match is surgery. And a lot depends on your scores on the national exams we have to take. I'm pretty confident, based on our MCAT scores, that we'll do well on those tests. According to what I read, something like three-fourths of students with good NBME exam scores Match one of their top three programs and half get their first choice. That said, everything depends on the number of positions and the number of applicants."

"And if you don't Match for some reason?" Lara asked.

"There's something called 'The Scramble'," Clarissa said. "Basically, they tell you if you Matched or not. If you didn't, they release a list of all the programs that didn't fill, and you apply to as many of those as you can, though you might have to select a different specialty."

"And if you don't make that?"

"Then you basically don't get to be a doctor," she replied. "You can try again the next year, but your chances go down each year."

"Wait!" Gene protested. "You could go to medical school, graduate, and still not get to be a doctor?"

"Yes, and that is why Mike and I are so obsessed with doing everything perfectly."

"Wow. I thought it was like Jocelyn's situation -- if she graduates from law school and passes the bar, she's a lawyer and can practice law. No wonder you guys are so fanatical!"

"Exactly," I confirmed.

We finished breakfast, and after going to the dorm to retrieve our books, Clarissa and I headed to our Abnormal Psych class. The professor returned our mid-term papers, and both Clarissa and I had A's. Mine also had a handwritten note which said 'See me, please'. At the end of class, I went to talk to Doctor Johnson.

"You wanted to see me?" I asked.

She nodded, "Are you seeing someone?"

"Seeing someone?"

"For help dealing with your friend's illness?"

I nodded, "I'm seeing Doctor Fran Mercer in Milford. I met her about four years ago because of something unrelated."

"OK. I just wanted to check. Your paper conveyed a lot of pain and anguish, and I wanted to make sure you were dealing with those feelings."

"I am, thanks. Between my counselor and my pastor, I'm getting the professional and spiritual support I need, and my friends are very supportive as well."

"OK. I just wanted to check. May I make a suggestion for your final paper?"

"Sure."

"I'd like you to write on the history of psychology and psychiatry and the problems with the provision of mental health care. You touched on those topics in your first paper on schizophrenia, and I'd like you to expand on them. I think that will be useful for your practice of emergency medicine."

"You aren't the first person to suggest that. And I think it's an appropriate topic for several reasons."

"Excellent. I look forward to reading it. See you on Monday."

"Thanks, Doctor Johnson."

She smiled, and I turned and left the classroom, meeting Clarissa and Sandy in the hall where they were waiting for me.

"Everything OK?" Clarissa asked as we started walking to P-Chem.

"Doctor Johnson wanted to make sure I was talking with a counselor or therapist about the obvious pain and anguish that came through in my paper."

"That was pretty obvious. No matter what happens, you're always going to love Angie."

"True. Doctor Johnson also suggested I do a paper on the history of psychology and the problems with the provision of care. She thinks it'll help me in the ER, and I suspect she's right. I also think she's hoping it helps me with my struggles with what's going on with Angie. I think it might also frustrate me because 'care' amounts to drugs which, on balance, don't do much other than making the person docile."

"I think your paper was somewhat cathartic," Sandy said.

"I suppose it was," I said. "It let me put on paper some things that were really gnawing at me. I think the second paper will do that to some extent as well -- I can rant about the terrible state of mental health care and the terrible public perception of mental illness."

"Except you don't actually rant," Clarissa observed. "Your commentary is well-reasoned and presented in a calm, logical manner. You showed that with that idiot preacher."

"It helps when your opponent comes to a battle of the wits unarmed!" Sandy said, causing Clarissa and me to laugh.

We entered the P-Chem classroom and took our seats, with Fran arriving just after us. We received our mid-term exam results at the beginning of class, and all four of us scored 95 or more, with Clarissa scoring a perfect 100, while I had a

99.5 because I'd made a math error I hadn't caught when I reviewed my answers before handing in the exam.

When class ended, we headed back to the dorm to listen to music until lunch, and after lunch, the four of us trooped back to the science building for our biology stats class. There, the results were reversed, with me scoring a perfect 100 thanks to regular help from Clark and Clarissa scoring a 99.5 due to a minor math error she'd made.

Our final class of the day was Doctor Blahnik's Russian literature course. She'd returned our papers on *Lolita* on Wednesday, and that meant we'd begin discussing *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. It was his one and only novel published in the Soviet Union, and had led to him being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. It, along with other unpublished writings, had also led to his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1974.

After class, Clarissa and I decided to have coffee in the Student Union.

"Russian nationalist and pro-Russian Orthodoxy," Clarissa said. "Sounds like Tasha's father!"

I chuckled, "Only Deacon Vasily was never in a gulag!"

"No, but Tasha's sister sure was!"

"True. I do agree with Solzhenitsyn on why the Communists took power and why the Iron Curtain exists -- men have forgotten God. Solzhenitsyn, like Dostoyevsky, was a fervent patriot and equally fervent Christian. And I also agree with what he said at Harvard about seven years ago -- '*But members of the U.S. antiwar movement wound up being involved in the betrayal of Far Eastern nations,*

in a genocide, and in the suffering today imposed on 30 million people there. Do those convinced pacifists hear the moans coming from there?'."

"I thought you were a pacifist!" Clarissa protested.

"I'm also rabidly anti-Communist. For that, you can thank my grandfather. Violence should never be initiated and should be avoided as a response until such time as there is no other possible action short of surrender or death."

"Martyrdom?"

"One is called, specifically, to that; one does not choose it. He's right in his assessment that America is spiritually weak and mired in what he called 'vulgar materialism'."

"Not you! Nor your family or most of the people in your church from what I can tell."

"I think Solzhenitsyn would approve. That said, I totally disagree with him on his views on music and the free press."

"He doesn't like modern music?"

"That's an understatement if there ever was one!" I chuckled. "Even Deacon Vasily has his guilty pleasures of Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, and Bob Dylan, though he keeps those albums out of plain sight at his house!"

"What's Solzhenitsyn's complaint about the press?"

"That unfettered press is a serious violation of privacy. I kind of agree with him, but I'd hate to live in a country without a free press. I think we have to take the

privacy violation with the fact that investigative reporters uncovered the corruption in the Nixon administration."

"I had no idea you were into this in that way!"

"Solzhenitsyn is one of my grandfather's heroes. I heard a lot about him growing up. Another one I heard a lot about is the dissident nuclear scientist Andrei Sakharov."

"I see a pattern!"

"You think?" I chuckled. "Don't get me wrong, my grandfather is fully aware of the failings of the Tsars, but I think any neutral observer has to say things are far worse under the Communists than under the Romanovs."

"I think things are far worse under Communists anywhere they're in charge!" Clarissa declared.

"I obviously agree!" I replied. "Changing subjects, which services are you going to come to?"

"Palm Sunday, the Twelve Gospels, the two late services on Friday, and Pascha."

"What about Abby?"

"She'll be at Palm Sunday and Pascha. I heard from Sophia that she's going to about half the services, and Robby and Lee will tag along for some of them, including Pascha."

"They don't want to miss the best party of the year! Lara is going to almost all the services, though she's skipping the Friday morning and early afternoon services because she has class."

We finished our coffee and headed back to the dorm, where I decided to take a short nap before eating dinner. After dinner, I drove to Elizaveta's house to pick her up for the first service of Palm Sunday weekend -- the Little Compline with the Canon of Saint Lazarus. When we arrived at church, I donned my cassock, and we went into the building. She took her usual place with the choir, and I went into the altar to prepare for the service.

The service began with the usual preparatory prayers, three Psalms -- 50, 69, and 142. Those were followed by the Little Doxology and the Nicene Creed. At that point, the choir and chanters began to sing the canon.

Let us all sing a triumphant song unto God, Who has done strange wonders with His mighty arm, and has saved Israel: for He is glorified

Thereafter followed the other odes, with the ninth portending what we would come to know at the Paschal service, which was a week away...

To confirm men's faith in Thy Resurrection, O Word, Thou hast called Lazarus from the tomb and as God hast raised him up, to show the peoples that Thou art both God and man in very truth, Who dost raise up the temple of Thy body.

Glory to Thee, our God; glory to Thee.

Shaking the gates and iron bars, Thou hast made Hell tremble at Thy voice. Hell and Death were filled with fear, O Savior, seeing Lazarus their prisoner brought to life by Thy word and rising from the tomb.

The canon was followed by the *Trisagion* prayers, prayers for the day, and the dismissal. As was true to the 'otherness' of Orthodoxy, the 'dismissal' wasn't, and everyone proceeded to venerate the icon of the Raising of Lazarus the Righteous while the *troparia* and *kontakia* for the day were sung. Once everyone had

venerated the icon, Father Nicholas concluded the service with a final prayer, and then, as was our tradition, everyone left the church in silence.



Lazarus Saturday, April 6, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I ran, said my prayers, and then Robby and Lee helped me carry boxes of records down to my car. We made two trips each, and then I headed to Elizaveta's house to pick her up. I didn't eat breakfast as there was a Divine Liturgy for Lazarus Saturday. At her house, she and her dad helped me carry the boxes of albums to the cottage, then she and I left for Saint Michael. As was going to be the case for the entire week, when we arrived, I donned my cassock, Elizaveta went to be with the choir, and I went into the altar to help prepare for the Matins and Divine Liturgy.

The services were normal for a non-Sunday Divine Liturgy, which meant slight changes to the hymns and prayers, in addition to the *troparia* and *kontakia* for Lazarus the Righteous, and following that theme, the Epistle was Hebrews 12:28-13:8 and the Gospel lesson of the day was John 11:1-45.

When the service ended, Father Nicholas and I went to the vestry to remove our vestments.

"Subdeacon, would you be willing to read the Paschal Homily of Saint John Chrysostom this year? In the past, Deacon Grigory has read it, and to be honest, by that point, having had to sing all seven gospels on Wednesday and all Twelve on Thursday, my voice is going to be shot!"

"Father Herman always said the same thing, which is why he had Deacon Vasily read it at Holy Transfiguration. Yes, of course, I'll do it."

"Thank you. It will be nice when you're a deacon, and I don't have to sing BOTH parts! I am grateful that His Grace allows you to do the Little Litanies, which provides some relief. Shall we join the congregation for lunch?"

We left the vestry and went to the church hall, where I took my place next to Elizaveta at the table where most of the High School and college kids were sitting. After Father Nicholas gave the blessing, we were served a Lenten meal of lentil stew and bread.

"Mark," Oksana asked, "now that you've made it through your first Great Lent, what do you think?"

"I think I had no idea how little attention I paid to what I ate in the past!"

"And you, Alyssa?"

"Praying and fasting are very different from what I did before, which was just read the Bible and go to Church and Sunday School. It made me think about how being a Christian needs to affect my whole life, from the moment I get up until the moment I go to bed. And even with the lenient rule Father gave me, I actually had to think about eating, which made me think about being a Christian at times when I never would have in the past."

"Do you have a cover for your Pascha basket?" Viktoriya asked.

"Yes. Maria made one for us. I suppose that means we have to get married because both our names are on it!"

There was laughter around the table, and when I looked at Mark, he shrugged sheepishly.

"Wasn't that kind of foreordained before you even came to Saint Michael?" Serafima asked. "You've been a couple for some time, right?"

"Yes. But we're only Seniors."

Elias laughed, "And Elizaveta is only a Sophomore, so I'm not sure what the problem is!"

"Are YOU ready to ask Serafima to marry you?" Oksana teased.

"Well, uhm, can I take the Fifth?"

"No," I chuckled. "That won't help you at all right now!"

"I think we both need to graduate from High School first!" Serafima said, taking the pressure off Elias. "Elizaveta had a unique situation because Mike needs to marry before he's ordained."

"Nik, did you receive a job offer yet?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, in fact, yesterday I heard from Milton Architects and Engineers in Columbus. They offered me an associate engineer's position, which means I'll work under a licensed engineer until I have enough experience to qualify for the license. I have to take an exam, too."

"Congratulations!" I said, joined by the others at the table.

"Where are the offices?" Elizaveta asked.

"Just south of I-270 on Route 23. It's about forty minutes from here, but if we move to Circleville near the Malenkovs, it would be about twenty minutes for me

to get to work and the same for Tasha to get to the pharmacy. And we'd still attend services at Saint Michael."

"That's great news!" I declared.

When we finished eating, Elizaveta and I helped clean up the church hall, then went to her house to spend the afternoon.

"I finished the cover for our Pascha basket," she said. "And there is plenty of room to add our kids' names!"

"Just how much room did you leave?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Enough for eight names!" she said with a smirk.

"And you want to carry EIGHT babies to term?" I asked.

"I think we'll start with the two we agreed on and take it from there!"

"Good plan! May I see the cover?"

"Sure. Let me go upstairs and get it. I'll be right back."

She was gone for less than a minute and returned with a white cloth with perfect needlepoint of our names, flowers, a three-bar cross, and 'Christ is Risen' in both Russian and English. As she'd promised, there was plenty of room for additional names when we eventually had kids.

"You did a really nice job on this," I said. "When do you want to do our shopping?"

"I was thinking about tomorrow after Liturgy. We're having dinner here, instead of with Tasha and Nik, because they're going to her parents' house for dinner. The Easter candy will all be on sale after noon!"

I chuckled, "A major benefit of being Orthodox! Most years, we can buy discounted Easter candy!"

"What do you usually put in your basket?"

"I've pretty much limited it to candy, hard salami, a bottle of wine, and a few other things because I haven't really had a way to cook or store anything. I'd like to do it as traditionally as possible."

"Do you want «пасха» (*paskha*)?" ("a Russian confection made during Holy Week to be consumed on Pascha (Easter)")

"Do you have a «пасочница»? (*pasochmitsa*)" I asked. ("the mould used to make «пасха»")

"No. I'd have to borrow one from my grandmother. But she's happy to lend it to me."

"Well, I like Russian desserts, and I suspect you're going to continue to make them, so I think we should continue that tradition."

"OK. I'll borrow my grandmother's mould and make it this week. There's a place in New York where I can order one for us." "OK. I'll borrow my grandmother's mould and make it this week. There's a place in New York where I can order one for us."

"Do you have a *prosphora* seal?"

"Yes. My grandmother gave me one. We can bake the *artoklasia* on Holy Saturday if that's OK."

"Perfect. I love *artoklasia*, especially when dipped in wine."

"And the other traditional things? Horseradish colored with beet juice? Salt? A butter lamb?"

I chuckled, "If you know where we can get a butter lamb, that would be awesome!"

"Kroger's carries them, and they're usually in the store until Western Easter," she said. "Mom bought one for us, but we have a mould, too, for years when it's five weeks between Western Easter and Pascha. There will be plenty of eggs from the ones we dye, so we'll add a few of those. What kind of candy do you prefer?"

"Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, cherry Jolly Ranchers, and Snickers."

"OK. I'll take care of our contribution to the potluck table, too. Let me take this cover back upstairs."

She was gone for another minute, and when she came back, we sat in the great room, listening to music and talking until it was time to eat dinner. After dinner, we headed back to church for Vespers for Palm Sunday, and when we finished, I took Elizaveta home and headed back to campus to do a bit of reading before going to bed early.



Palm Sunday, April 7, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Morning, Lissa!" I said when she came to my door on Sunday morning.

"Abby will meet us at church, if that's OK. I'll ride home with her."

"Of course it's OK."

"She didn't really want to be forty minutes early."

"I totally understand."

We left the dorm, got into my car, drove to Elizaveta's house to pick her up, and then headed to Saint Michael. This morning, instead of going to the choir area, Elizaveta joined some other women preparing the pussy willow branches, which Russians used instead of palms. Clarissa went with her, and I went into the altar to prepare for the services. Just before Matins began, the ladies brought the pussy willow branches in baskets and set them on the *solea*, the extension of the altar floor, which stretched out past the iconostasis. We did, as was also common for Russian churches in America, have some palm fronds which were in vases in front of the iconostasis, along with a small basket of palm fronds woven into crosses.

Immediately after the Matins Gospel, which was Matthew 21:1-11;15-17, the chanter intoned Psalm 50, and then Father Nicholas and I left the altar, with me carrying the censer and a small silver bucket with rose water and an aspergillum. We were accompanied by acolytes with candles and the processional cross, and we went to stand before the baskets of branches, I handed him the censer, and he swung it while reciting the blessing prayer.

O Lord our God, who sittest upon the cherubim, who hast reaffirmed Thy power and sent Thine only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save the world through His Cross, Burial and Resurrection: who when He drew near to Jerusalem for His voluntary Passion, the people that sat in darkness and the shadow of death took, as tokens of victory, boughs of trees and branches of palms, thus foretelling

His Resurrection. Do Thou Thyself, O Master, keep and preserve us also, who, following their example, on the pre-feast of that day, carry in our hands palms and branches, and who like the crowds and the children cry unto Thee, Hosanna! That with hymns and spiritual songs we may be accounted worthy to attain the life-giving Resurrection on the third day: in Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom Thou art blessed, together with Thine all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and forever: world without end. Amen.

Father Nicholas handed back the censer and took the aspergillum from the bucket. He sprinkled the branches with rose water while reciting a blessing prayer three times.

These palms and branches are blessed by the grace of the All-Holy Spirit, through sprinkling with this holy water: in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When he finished, he replaced the aspergillum in the bucket, and we returned to the altar to complete the Matins service. Just before the start of the Divine Liturgy, the women came forward and took the baskets of pussy willows and distributed them amongst the faithful, along with the crosses woven from the palm fronds. These were held by the congregation through the service, and as was a local tradition at Saint Michael the Archangel, for a procession around the church three times once the Liturgy had been completed.

When the procession finished, we returned to the church for the dismissal, then went to the church hall for our Palm Sunday meal which included fish, as it was a feast day during the fast. When we finished our lunch, Elizaveta and I left the church and drove to Kroger's, which was on the opposite side of town from the university, so we could shop for the things for our Pascha basket.

In the store, I pushed the cart, following Elizaveta around the store as she selected items from the coolers and shelves. As she put each item in the cart, I crossed it

from the list she had made. At the checkout, once everything was rung through, I paid and then loaded the bags into the cart and pushed them out to the car. After putting them in the trunk, we drove to the State Liquor Store, where I purchased a bottle of red wine and a bottle of Russian vodka, though Elizaveta had to stay in the car so as not to have the clerk question if I was buying for a minor. That accomplished, we headed back to Elizaveta's house.

We had a nice, quiet afternoon and a nice dinner of pan-seared tuna and vegetables, then headed back to church for the first Bridegroom Matins service, which, in the upside-down world of Holy Week, was done Sunday evening instead of on Monday morning. The service was 'Royal Matins', which meant extra Psalms were sung compared to a normal Matins service, and there was an additional procession with the icon of the Bridegroom, during which the choir sang the appointed troparion three times.

Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching; and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul; do not be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given up to death and lest you be shut out of the kingdom. But rouse yourself, crying, 'Holy, holy, holy art Thou, O our God'.

The Gospel reading was Matthew 21:18-43, and the *Synaxarion* was read, which summed up the meaning of the service.

On this day begins the anniversary of the Holy Passion of the Savior, He of whom Joseph of exceeding beauty is taken as the earliest symbol; for this Joseph was the eleventh of the sons of Jacob, and because his father loved him exceedingly, his brothers envied him and threw him into a pit. Then they took him out and sold him to strangers, who sold him in Egypt. He was slandered for his chastity and was thrown into prison. But finally, he was taken out of prison, and he attained a high rank and received honors worthy of kings, becoming governor of the whole of

Egypt, whose people he supported. Thus he symbolized in himself the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and His consequent great glory.

To the remembrance of Joseph is added the story of the fig tree, which the Lord cursed on this day because of its barrenness, so that it dried up. The fig tree was a symbol of the Council of the Jews, which did not show the necessary fruits of virtue and righteousness, so that Christ stripped it of every spiritual grace.

Wherefore, by the intercessions of the all-comely Joseph, O Christ, Have mercy on us.

Again, by our tradition, when the service ended, everyone venerated the icon of the Bridegroom, then left the church in silence. I took Elizaveta home, then headed back to campus to spend some quiet time reading before saying my prayers and going to bed.



Great and Holy Wednesday, April 10, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Wednesday morning, when I rose, I dressed and went out to run and took stock of where we were so far in the journey to the despair of Calvary and the joy of the empty tomb. Monday and Tuesday nights' services had been near repeats of Sunday night's, albeit with different Gospel readings and *Synaxaria*, on Monday commemorating the Parable of the Ten Virgins, and on Tuesday, the piety and righteousness of the 'fallen' woman who anointed Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair, and contrasting her piety with the impiety of Judas.

For the Unction service, there would be seven Gospel readings, along with seven Epistles and seven prayers, and all the faithful would be anointed with holy oil. It was also the night when we'd see people we hadn't seen for nearly a year, who

came to church simply to be anointed and who would disappear for another year. I found it odd that they would come to Unction but not Pascha and decided I'd ask Father Nicholas about it when I arrived at church that evening.

After my run, I showered, dressed, said my prayers, and then joined the gang for breakfast, which was the first full meal I'd eat after the dinner at Elizaveta's house early Sunday evening and the last one I'd eat until after the Divine Liturgy on Holy Saturday morning.

"How are you holding up?" Clarissa asked after breakfast as she, Sandy, and I walked to Abnormal Psych.

"I'm always energized during Holy Week despite the number of services."

"But barely eating?"

I shrugged, "I keep my blood sugar up with grapefruit juice, and I get my protein from nuts. And honestly, I always feel good when I follow the strict fasting rules -- spiritually, mentally, and physically."

"I think I'd be more worried about his 'fasting' from sex!" Sandy teased.

"Given my options are death in some excruciating fashion, a potentially lengthy jail sentence, or abstinence for another seven weeks, I think the choice is clear!"

"I don't think I would cross Elizaveta," Clarissa said. "I thought Tasha was feisty and determined, but Elizaveta's feistiness 'goes to eleven!'"

I laughed at the *This is Spinal Tap* reference.

"But does that translate to bed?" Sandy teased. "And if it does, Mike isn't exactly 'wild and crazy' when it comes to sex."

"His little *pussy* cat is going to blow his mind!" Clarissa declared gleefully.

"Or something else!" Sandy added equally gleefully.

Fortunately, we arrived at class, and that put an end to the teasing, which I knew was good-natured but which I also knew if Elizaveta heard, THEY would face her fury. They didn't resume the teasing after class when we walked to P-Chem, nor when we returned to the dorm. I didn't join the gang for lunch, instead opting to read and study until it was time for our afternoon classes. After stats and Russian Literature, we headed back to the dorm, and I took a brief nap before completing my stats homework.

After the gang had dinner, Sophia came to my door and the two of us left to pick up Elizaveta and then head to the church for the Holy Unction service.

"Do you guys get a lot of once-a-year folks for unction?" Sophia asked.

"Indeed we do. People we see once a year. I was going to ask Father Nicholas about that. I take it you see that a lot?"

"Greeks who otherwise wouldn't set foot in a church except for a wedding, baptism, or funeral show up for Unction. Our priest back home said they were coming in for their 'annual lube job!'"

I laughed, "Wow!"

"Greeks have a lot of strange folk customs, and receiving Unction is one of them. They won't even show up for Pascha, though some do come for Palm Sunday. Are your once-a-year folks Greek?"

"Some of them might be," I replied. "But I never really paid close attention, and the church is dark except for votive lamps and candles during the evening services this week. Well, and Father's battery-operated reading light! I don't think even my eyes would be good enough to read the service books or Gospel book by candlelight!"

"Do you ever read the Gospels?" Sophia asked. "Or is that solely a deacon's role?"

"It's the deacon's, or in his absence, the priest's. I can't imagine a subdeacon being granted «ekonomia» to do that because I can't go in front of the altar nor move through the Royal Doors unless I'm carrying the *trikirion* or *dikirion* for the bishop. And I'm absolutely not permitted to touch the altar. I do have «ekonomia» to do that in the instances where we need to change the cloth to match our vestments, if Father Nicholas is there with me. But that is a HUGE concession, and only happens when there is only one major-order clergyman."

"How does Saint Michael handle walking under the Gospel without the deacon available?"

"I'll hold the Gospel book with the most senior acolyte. Tonight, that's Elias, but Father has to bring it out to me."

"Is Father hearing confessions before the service?"

"Yes. He'll do that tonight and then between services on Fridays."

When we arrived at church, I let Father Nicholas know that Sophia wanted him to hear her confession. He heard her confession, along with about a dozen others, before the service. Due to the seven Epistle readings, the seven Gospel readings, and the seven prayers that went with them, as well as the blessing of the unction, and then applying unction to all the faithful, the service lasted just shy of four

hours. That meant it was after 11:00pm when I dropped Elizaveta at home. We exchanged a quick hug, then I got back into the car for the drive back to campus.

"You're driving tomorrow morning, right?" I asked.

"Yes. Robby and Lee are coming, so we'll bring my car."

When we arrived back on campus, I went straight to my room, said my evening prayers, undressed, brushed my teeth, and then climbed into bed. I set my alarm a bit later than usual as I wasn't going to eat breakfast, and the Divine Liturgy for Holy Thursday morning didn't start until 10:00am. I turned off the light, put my head on the pillow, and was soon fast asleep.

LVII. Holy Week and Pascha, Part II

Great and Holy Thursday, April 11, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

I slept in Thursday morning, then ran, showered, dressed, and, because Elizaveta was in school, drove directly to the church. Elizaveta would be there, but her mom would pick her up just in time to get to the service, then take her back to school immediately afterwards. Attendance at the service, which commemorated the Last Supper, was usually sparse as people had to work or be in school. The same would be true for the Friday services, which were held during the day. Unfortunately, there really wasn't any way to adjust the service times because there were services in the evenings as well.

When I arrived at the church, several of the older ladies were busy decorating the 'tomb', a replica of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher -- which could be carried by long poles -- with ribbons and fresh flowers. There were other women in the kitchen boiling eggs in a large pot filled with water, onion skins, and vinegar. I'd been amazed when I was younger that yellow onion skins made a perfect red dye and that a bit of olive oil applied after the eggs were boiled made the eggs shiny red.

Continuing with the upside-down nature of Holy Week, the celebration of the Last Supper on Thursday morning was also a Vespereal Divine Liturgy. In addition, the Divine Liturgy was that of Saint Basil the Great, which was somewhat longer than the more commonly used Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. Fortunately, the rubrics were the same for the clergy, though it would be Father Nicholas who had to sing and chant, even though his voice was already showing the first signs of overuse.

I went about my usual tasks preparing for the liturgy but added filling a thermos with warm water so that Father could sip it to try to keep his voice in good enough shape to handle the Twelve Gospels service, which we would celebrate later in the day. When the preparations were made, I stood quietly and waited for the service to begin.

Just under two hours later, with the service completed, I spoke briefly with Elizaveta, but we couldn't hug or kiss as I was wearing my cassock. She left with her mother, and I went to the small storeroom and brought out a table, which I took to the nave. I retrieved a small cloth which matched the purple cloth which covered the altar and draped it over the table. Next, I retrieved a large golden bowl from the kitchen, filled it with pure white sand, which we used for the candle stands, and set it on the table. I then placed twelve candles in the sand. Finally, I changed the icon on the veneration stand near the back of the nave, removing the icon of the Last Supper and replacing it with the icon of Christ holding the Gospel book and making the sign of blessing with his right hand. Preparations complete, I headed back to campus.

"Hey, Mik!" Jocelyn called out when I stepped off the elevator.

"Hi, Jos!"

"Got some time for me?"

"Always," I replied.

We went into my room, and I shut the door most of the way, which signaled that I was busy and should only be interrupted in an emergency. I put on one of Jocelyn's favorite albums, a collection of Frank Sinatra's greatest hits, and we sat down on the couch.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You know I've had continual pain and a limp from my accident. Well, the pain is worse, and I'm going to need back surgery to relieve a compressed nerve."

"When did you find out?"

"I saw the doctor yesterday and had an X-ray this morning. They read it right away, and the doctor called me a few minutes ago."

"I assume you'll have the surgery after finals?"

"Yes. Ibuprofen makes it bearable, and obviously, I'm going to be in the hospital for a time, likely four or five days."

"What procedure?" I asked.

"A laminectomy, which my doctor said would be fairly simple in my case. They just need to remove some bone that's compressing one of the nerves. Basically, it's all a result of the hardware they used to put me back together after the accident."

"Is this a permanent repair or a temporary one?"

"That's unclear. You know I'll eventually have hip problems because of my limp, but everything there looks good so far."

"Did you tell Gene?"

"He went with me for the X-ray. You're the second one to know. Now that I've told you, I need to call my parents."

"How does this work with insurance? It's a result of the accident, right?"

"His insurance paid my medical bills, plus they'll cover any surgery that is needed within seven years. I also received a decent settlement, which would cover anything after that. I was actually surprised you never asked about that."

"It wasn't my business," I replied.

"Let's just say college and law school are free, and there's still plenty of money left if I need surgery down the road."

"Not to mention the big bucks you'll make as an attorney!" I replied with a silly grin.

"I have to get there first!"

"You will. You'll ace the LSAT for sure. And I can't imagine you not passing the Bar exam on your first try."

"You know, I never asked, but how does medical licensing work?"

"You take the NBME Step 1 Exam after your second year of medical school. You have to pass to continue. You take the NBME Step 2 Exam during your fourth year, and you have to pass to graduate. In Ohio, you take the licensing exam after your second year of Residency. Then, after that, there are Board certifications. Once you pass the licensing exam, you can practice, though I'd still have at least one, if not two years of Residency after the exam. Back to you, though, did you schedule the surgery?"

"No. I'll do that after I talk to my parents, but I'm going to try for as early in June as possible."

I frowned, "I don't like the idea of being out of touch when you're having surgery, but I guess it can't be helped."

"You don't leave until the 8th, right?"

"Right."

"Hopefully, I can schedule it before then. Let me call my parents and then call the surgeon's office."

"Let me know, and let me know if I can do anything for you."

"Thanks, Mik."

"You're welcome, Jos."

We stood and hugged, and she left. I closed the door behind her and took a nap before meeting Fran in the computer lab to finish our lab report. We finished just before dinner, and I spent an hour reading while the gang went to dinner. After she came back from dinner, Clarissa and I left for Elizaveta's house, and after we picked her up, we headed to church.

When we arrived, I went to the storeroom and brought out the base for the large wooden three-bar cross to which an icon of the crucified Christ was affixed. I set the base behind the table with the candles, then returned to the storeroom for the cross. I set it in the base, then went to the vestry where the icons were stored and carefully removed the cloth that covered the large icon of the crucified Christ, which I then took and carefully attached to the wooden cross. That completed, I went into the altar to prepare for what was basically an extended Matins service.

After the initial prayers and Psalms, Father chanted the first, and longest, Gospel reading, John 13:31--18:1, after which I lit one of the dozen candles in the bowl I'd

set up earlier in the day. More than an hour after we'd started, and following the fifth Gospel reading and the fourteenth antiphon, Father Nicholas and I left the altar, with me carrying the censer. I handed it to him, and he censed the cross nine times, then, after handing me the censer, removed the icon from the cross, carried it into the altar, and laid it on the altar table. I hung the censer on its stand, then removed the cross from its base and carried it into the altar via the deacon's door.

While the choir chanted the fifteenth antiphon, Father Nicholas, the acolytes, and I began a procession similar to the Great Entrance, though rather than carrying the chalice, Father Nicholas carried the cross on his shoulder. When we reached the table with the candles, he carried the cross around it and the base three times while I walked backwards before him with the censer. After the three circuits, he put the cross in the base, then went through the Royal Doors to retrieve the icon of the crucified Christ, which he affixed to the cross. I handed him the censer, and once he had censed the cross nine times, he returned the censer, then made a prostration before the cross and kissed it. That completed, we returned to the altar.

Just over two hours later, we finished the service, and the entire congregation formed a line to kiss the icon of the crucified Christ. We then departed the church in silence.



Great and Holy Friday, April 12, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday, I was up very early, ran, picked up Elizaveta, and arrived at the church by 5:45am. We began the service of The First Hour promptly at 6:00am and finished about forty minutes later. The service of The Third Hour was at 9:00am, that of The Sixth Hour at noon, and finally, The Ninth Hour at 3:00pm,

followed immediately by the Typica. Between the services, Elizaveta and I spent time together, talking quietly.

After the Typica, Nathan, Elias, Nik, and I carried the 'tomb' into the nave and placed it between the cross and the *solea*. Once we had it in place, I went to the vestry and opened the drawer which contained the «Плащаница» (*plashchanitsa*), or *Epitaphion*, which was a cloth icon showing the reposed Christ being laid in the tomb. I carefully took it out and carried it to the *Prothesis* table. Later, Father Nicholas would move it to the altar. Sophia, Robby, Lee, Clarissa, Jocelyn, and Gene arrived just before Vespers, and after greeting them, I went into the altar, quickly reviewed the service with the acolytes, then waited quietly for Father Nicholas to begin the service, which he did promptly at 4:30pm.

The service began and ended as a normal Vespers service, but with three Old Testament readings, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel. During the last part of the Gospel, which Father Nicholas chanted, I took the icon of the crucified Christ from the cross and wrapped it in a large, white cloth. When Father Nicholas finished chanting the Gospel lesson, he returned the Gospel book to the altar table. He came back out through the Royal Doors, and I handed him the shrouded icon, which he laid on the altar.

After two sets of *eketenia*, Father Nicholas, Nathan, Elias, and I made a procession carrying the «Плащаница» (*plashchanitsa*) over our heads, preceded by four younger acolytes carrying liturgical torches, the processional cross, and the censer. We circled the 'tomb' three times, then laid the «Плащаница» (*plashchanitsa*) in the 'tomb'. Father prostrated before the tomb, then kissed the «Плащаница» (*plashchanitsa*). All of us except the two youngest acolytes returned to the altar. Those two, holding liturgical torches, 'stood guard' at the tomb and would remain there until the start of the Lamentations service. Vespers ended about fifteen minutes later, and after the congregation had venerated the «Плащаница» (*plashchanitsa*), there was a brief break before we began the Lamentations service at 7:00pm.

The service which followed, Lamentations, was my favorite service of the entire year, and was, without a doubt, the most beautiful and moving service. The service began as a regular Royal Matins service and contained my favorite hymn of the year -- the Third Stasis of Lamentations. It was, as I thought for many years, the perfect hymn. The only hymn which even came close was *Let My Prayer Arise*, which we had sung during the Pre-sanctified Liturgies on Wednesdays during Lent.

As we moved through the service, my anticipation built until the choir began singing the first mournful verses of the Third Stasis...

*Priest: All generations
Offer adoration
To Thy burial, O Christ.*

*Choir: Joseph of Arimathea
Took Thee down from the tree
And laid Thee in a grave.*

then slowly transformed into a hymn full of great expectation...

*The myrrh-bearing women
Came very early in the morning
And sprinkled myrrh upon the tomb.*

The choir repeated those joyful verses while Father Nicholas sprinkled rose water on the congregation. At the completion of the hymn, there were additional prayers and hymns before Father Nicholas led the congregation as four men carried the 'tomb' containing the «Плащаница» (*plashchanitsa*) around the outside of the church, preceded by Father Nicholas carrying the Gospel book, me

carrying the censer, and the acolytes carrying the processional cross and liturgical torches.

When we'd completed the third circuit, the men held the 'tomb' high enough for the entire congregation to bend and walk under it to return inside the church, with other men taking their place so they could do so as well. The service concluded with the Great Doxology, followed by lessons from the Old and New Testament and a Gospel reading describing the Roman soldiers' request to guard Christ's tomb.

Once the service ended, Nik and Tasha brought two music stands near the tomb and, using two Psalters, began what would be an all-night vigil. I left the church with Elizaveta and her parents and took off my cassock so we could exchange a 'good night' hug. After she got into her dad's car, I put on my cassock and went into the church, where I would stay all night to ensure that there was never a time when the tomb was unattended, and the Psalms were not being read.



Great and Holy Saturday, April 12, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I ensured there were enough people to continue reading the Psalms, then went back to campus to run and shower. After I dressed, I picked up Elizaveta so I could return to the church to oversee the readers. Nik and Tasha met us at church about ninety minutes before the service began so we could carry the baptismal font, which had begun life as a horse trough, into the nave.

Once we had it situated, I opened a window, then went outside and snaked a garden hose in so that Nik could pull it into the font. Once he had it in place, I opened the spigot to allow water to flow. While we filled the font, Elizaveta and

Tasha got flowers from the refrigerator and put them in vases, which they arranged around the font, leaving plenty of space for Mark and Alyssa to be able to climb in and Father to perform the baptisms.

"Hi, Subdeacon!" Mark said as I was turning off the faucet.

"Good morning! How are you guys doing?"

"Happy that it's finally Holy Saturday!"

"Should we change?" Alyssa asked.

"Wait for your godparents to arrive. They'll take care of everything and make sure you're in the right place at the right time!"

They went into the church while I went to the window, where Nik handed me the hose, which I coiled and then placed on the hook over the faucet. I went back into the church, shut the window, and closed the blinds. I got a small stand from the storeroom and brought it to the nave and set the book with the baptismal service and a vial of oil on it.

Doctor Evgeni and Maria arrived a few minutes later and handed me the baptismal crosses and icons they had purchased for Mark and Alyssa. I took those into the altar and put them on the *Prothesis* table so Father Nicholas could move them to the altar when he arrived. When I walked out through the Deacon's door, Mrs. Tupolev brought me the *prosphora* loaves we'd use, so I turned around and took those to the *Prothesis* table. Father Nicholas arrived a few minutes later.

What was odd about Saturday morning was that we wore white Paschal vestments but would switch back to purple in the evening. That was a product of the historical changes in the times of the baptismal ceremony which had moved

from just before Paschal Matins were celebrated late in the evening to the morning. The baptisms would occur at the end of the Vespereal service, immediately before we began the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great.

Just before the service began, Father Nicholas blessed the icons of Saint Mark the Evangelist and Saint Photini, and the two baptismal crosses, then placed them on the altar. We completed Vespers, and then we left the altar for the baptismal ceremony, with Father Nicholas bringing the chrism with him from the altar table while I brought the censer. Twenty minutes later, after both Mark and Alyssa had been immersed three times and anointed with chrism, they left to change into dry clothes while we began the Divine Liturgy. When it was time for the Eucharist, Mark and Alyssa were first in line, followed by their godparents.

"Go home and get some sleep, Subdeacon," Father Nicholas ordered as we removed our vestments.

"Yes, Father," I said.

I was actually going to Doctor Blahnik's house so that I wouldn't be disturbed. Rob, the 7th-floor RA, would cover for me. I received Father's blessing, then went out to my car, removed my cassock, got a hug from Elizaveta, and headed to Doctor Blahnik's house. When I arrived, I drank a glass of grapefruit juice and ate a few shelled walnuts. I took a quick shower, dried off, and climbed into bed. I set the alarm for 8:00pm and quickly fell asleep.

"Sleep well?" Doctor Blahnik asked when I came downstairs from my room just after 8:00pm.

"I did," I replied. "I know I've said this before, but thank you for the use of the room."

"You're welcome, Mike. I hope you and Elizaveta will visit after you're married. You'll always be welcome."

"I'd like that, and I'm sure Elizaveta will as well."

"Enjoy your services!"

"Thanks! I will."



Great and Holy Pascha, April 13-14, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

I left and headed to Elizaveta's house, and after she greeted me, we went to the kitchen to get our prepared Pascha basket, which I carried out to the car, and a crockpot, which Elizaveta carried. Ten minutes later, we arrived at the darkened church, meeting Tasha, Nik, Mark, and Alyssa, who would help me prepare the nave for the Paschal service. I put on my cassock, unlocked the church, and we all went inside. The women put the three Pascha baskets on the *solea* in front of the iconostasis, then put their crockpots in the church hall and plugged them in. The men moved the tomb out of the nave and put it in a corner of the church hall where it was kept.

Elizaveta got a dozen nightlights with red bulbs that gave off minimal light, and the women plugged them into outlets in the narthex and nave. They would provide the only light, save the dim, shielded battery-operated reading lights the choir, chanters, and Father Nicholas would use and the eternal flame, which always burned in an oil lamp on the altar. The other five began carrying vases of prepared flowers from the church hall to the nave, placing them on the *solea*, while I hooked up a small electric pump and emptied the water from the baptismal font. Once it was empty, we carried it out to the shed for storage.

Once those tasks were completed, the six of us prepared the candles which the congregation would hold, sliding tapers through round paper wax guards and placing them in a box at the back of the church. I also closed the candle boxes which were in the narthex, and covered them with a white cloth, as nothing was to distract from the light which would come from the altar during the service. We'd just finished those tasks when Elias and Nathan arrived, and the three of us ensured all the oil lamps were full and had fresh wicks while Elizaveta and Tasha directed the others in minor tasks. Everything was ready when Father Nicholas arrived just after 10:00pm.

Time went by quickly at that point as he completed the *Proskomide*, preparing the gifts for the Eucharist. Nathan took the remaining loaves of *prosphora* and cut them into pieces to be used as the *antidoron*, while Elias filled a decanter with wine to which warm water would be added just before the Eucharist. He also filled the hot pot with water, which would later be turned on so that the *zeon* was warm.

Members of the congregation slowly filled the nave, along with most of my friends from Taft. The service began with Father Nicholas and me vested in purple and with the Royal Doors closed and the curtain drawn behind them. The 'Rush Service', as it was called, began with the usual prayers, followed by Psalm 50 and the canon.

During the Eighth Ode, Father and I changed from purple to white vestments, and following the Ninth Ode, even the reading lights were extinguished, leaving just a faint red glow at people's feet. Father Nicholas sang 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal: have mercy on us' three times while the two main chanters made their way into the altar, where they, together with Father Nicholas, sang the *troparion*.

When thou didst submit thyself unto death, O thou deathless and immortal one, then thou didst destroy hell with thy Godly power; and when thou didst raise the dead from beneath the earth, all the powers of heaven did cry aloud unto thee: O Christ, thou giver of life! Glory to thee!

Following a brief litany, Father Nicholas lit the large Paschal candle from the eternal lamp while I opened the curtains behind the Royal Doors. Nathan, standing opposite me, and I waited for Father Nicholas to turn towards the congregation, then opened the Royal Doors so he could move out to the *solea*.

"Come ye and receive light from the unwaning light, and glorify Christ who is risen from the dead!" he sang, and members of the congregation moved forward to light their candles from the Paschal candle while the choir repeated the invitation he'd sung. Once everyone had lit their candles, we made a procession out of the church and gathered before the main doors. The one exception was Viktor Kozlov, who stayed inside to play the role of Satan.

Following the reading of the Gospel, which proclaimed the Resurrection, we sang the Paschal Troparion.

Priest: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!

Choir: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life! {Twice}

Priest: Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered! Let those who hate Him flee from before His face!

Choir: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!

Priest: As smoke vanishes, so let them vanish; as wax melts before the fire!

Choir: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!

Priest: So let the sinners perish before the face of God; and let the righteous be glad!

Choir: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!

Priest: This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Choir: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!

Priest: Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit! Now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Choir: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!

Priest: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death;

Choir: and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!

Following a litany, Father Nicholas took the processional cross and banged the doors of the church with the staff on which it was carried and, in a loud voice, exclaimed, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be lifted up, O ye everlasting doors, for the King of Glory shall come in!"

From inside the church, in a deep, booming voice, Viktor Kozlov replied, "Who is this King of Glory?!" to which Father Nicholas replied, "The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle!"

The sequence was repeated a total of three times, after which Viktor opened the door and lay on the floor so that the entire congregation could 'trample Satan', stepping carefully over him, assisted by several of the other men to ensure nobody tripped. We all returned to the nave, and after the congregation venerated the Gospel book, the choir sang the Paschal Canon, the chanters read the *Synaxarion*, the Paschal *Stichera* were sung, and then the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom began.

After the Gospel reading, I stood in the center of the church and proclaimed the Paschal homily of Saint John Chrysostom, which was traditionally read in all churches on Pascha, and which concluded with a stirring proclamation.

O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead is become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages. Amen.

This was followed by the Eucharistic service, and when that was completed, Father Nicholas blessed the Pascha baskets, and following the final prayers of the Divine Liturgy, everyone took their baskets to the church hall. Father Nicholas and I quickly removed our vestments and joined them, and after a final prayer, the party began.

"Now I see why you didn't tell us about that service," Alyssa said when Elizaveta and I sat down with them, the other young adults, and some of my friends. And why you pleaded with us not to read about it in advance. It was like nothing I've ever seen before!"

"It is pretty awe-inspiring," I agreed. "How did your parents do?"

"They were with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, so I'm not sure. But they look happy."

I glanced over to where her parents were sitting with the Johnsons, Trents, and Wilsons, three families which had converted to Orthodoxy over the past several years, and I was sure they were in good hands, so I returned my attention to the young adults.

"Any chance I could get some vodka?" Elias asked with a smirk.

"That's a question for your dad!" I replied with a grin.

"And me?" Elizaveta asked.

"Same thing. That ring on your finger isn't sufficient to make you my wife just yet!"

There was general laughter from the others at the table.

"Which Petrovich ALSO regrets," Clarissa teased, causing even more laughter.

She and I exchanged a quick look, which reminded her that she had to be careful about comments like that at church, but I was sure none of the young adults would be offended or make an issue, not even Nik, who had mellowed a bit over the past year, which I had no doubt was a direct result of being engaged to Tasha.

"How many days now, Liza?" Oksana asked.

"42!" Elizaveta exclaimed. "Exactly six weeks!"

"Which is when you'll discover the TRUE answer to life, the universe, and everything!" Yuliana teased.

Everyone laughed, and Elizaveta blushed, though not as deeply as she had in the past.

"And what exactly is that, Yulechka?" her mother asked, having quietly come up behind her. "And how would you know?"

Yuliana looked as if she'd seen a ghost, and the laughter died immediately.

"Uhm, I was just teasing her, Mom. It was a joke about a book."

"A 'joke' which I think we'll discuss tomorrow. I just came to make sure you kids had enough to eat."

There was no way that was the case because the table was piled with food, both from the potluck table and our Pascha baskets. It HAD to be the sixth sense which every «бабушка» (*babushka*) developed and which let them somehow know when people were stepping out of line.

"We're fine, Mrs. Loginov," I said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Subdeacon. Please keep the teens in line and ensure there is no more «некультурный» (*nekulturny*) behavior!" ("inappropriate")

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied.

She nodded and left.

"Sorry," Yuliana said quietly.

I smiled, "I'm not even twenty-two, and despite the cassock, I'm not a party pooper or spoilsport! Just be careful what you say because the walls have ears!"

"No kidding!" Oksana grouched. "I swear, if I even THINK something my mom wouldn't like, she knows about it!"

I chuckled, "Want to know the 'adult secret'?"

"What's that?" she asked, obviously curious.

"That they were all teenagers once, too, and they remember!"

The teens and young adults all laughed, but I also saw a few knowing nods as if a light had just been turned on. That conversation with my mom four years earlier had been a watershed.

"I think you just explained how my mom seems to know everything I'm thinking!" Serafima declared.

"I didn't figure it out until after I turned eighteen," I replied. "And if you think about it, it explains why all of your grandmothers want you to marry as soon as possible."

Nathan laughed, "Because they think we'll..."

Everyone else laughed at the thought he left hanging in the air.

"I think they know the temptations we all face and the struggles we all have, and that's their solution to prevent us from having to stand before the icon of Christ and confess a specific sin."

"God, that would be embarrassing!" Elias said.

"More than knowing that God was already aware of the transgression?" I asked.

"I mean, telling Father Nicholas!"

"While it may look and seem that way, you aren't telling Father Nicholas. You're admitting to Christ that you've fallen short, and Father Nicholas is there as a witness and as the vehicle through which God helps you overcome temptation via whatever prescription Father thinks is best. Remember, the only person you're fooling with unconfessed sin is YOU. God already knows and looks into

your heart. And trust me, whatever it is you might have done, I can pretty much guarantee after nearly twenty years as a priest, Father Nicholas has heard it before. But we can pick this up in Sunday School next week. Tonight, we're supposed to party!"

"Like it's 1999?" Clark asked from the end of the table.

I chuckled, "I'm not sure Prince is the model we want to follow, but that is the general idea!"

"I've never been to a church party like this!" Gene said, shaking his head. "And certainly not one at 2:30am!"

"They haven't even started!" Nathan said. "Trust me, once the older men drink enough vodka, the party will REALLY start! Mike, did you ever learn to dance Russian style?"

I shook my head, "No. I fell on my butt even without drinking vodka!"

"Your parents let you drink vodka?" Oksana asked.

"No, but my grandfather and his friends did! If you want to have REAL fun at a Pascha party, hang out with your grandfathers and their friends! Just be prepared for your moms to be unhappy!"

"Was it worth it?" Nathan asked.

"Oh yeah," I chuckled. "Despite my grandfather and one of his friends having to carry me into the house and put me to bed one year. That was the first and last time I ever got drunk."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen. My mom was pretty unhappy, but more with her dad than with me."

"I bet! My mom would lose it!"

"I wouldn't advise getting drunk, but honestly, when you see them go out for cigars, go hang out with them. You'll be glad you did."

"And what about the girls?" Oksana asked.

I chuckled, "You'll turn into «бабушки» (*babushki*) automatically. I think it's the combination of the chrism, Eucharist, and betrothal ring that does it!"

"Oh God, I do NOT want to be my grandmother!" Serafima protested.

"Are you SURE about that?" I asked. "Your grandmother is pretty awesome!"

"But she's so old-fashioned and conservative!"

"So is mine," I said conspiratorially, "but have you considered she knows all the stuff your mom did when she was a teenager?"

Serafima's eyes went wide with surprise, "Whoa! I hadn't thought about that!"

"So, don't you think she might be a good person to talk to?" I continued.

She giggled, "That might be VERY interesting!"

"And, Yulechka," I said, using the diminutive her mother had used, "you never know, but your grandmother might have some advice for talking to your mom."

"I never knew you were such a subversive!" Jocelyn teased.

"We young adults have to stick together!" I declared.

"Will you be saying that once the bishop ordains you a deacon?" Oksana asked.

"The laying-on of hands doesn't turn me into a spy or a «стукач» (*stukach*)! The worst I'll ever do is suggest you speak to Father Nicholas. And you know neither he nor any priest can reveal anything you say in confession." ("stool pigeon")

"Isn't there an exception for reporting abuse?" Clarissa asked.

"Yes," I replied. "But Father would have to speak to the bishop first."

"What happens if you confess a real crime?" Serafima asked.

"Usually, the priest would advise you to speak to a lawyer, and beyond that, it would really depend on what you had done. Just as if he felt you needed medical or psychological help, he'd refer you to an expert in those fields."

"But you could get absolution?"

"If you were properly repentant, yes, though he might ask you to refrain from the Eucharist for a time, make restitution, or do some other thing depending again on the severity of what you did. The easiest course of action is not to commit any crimes!"

"Mike," Mark asked. "What would I need to do to become an acolyte?"

"You'd need Father's blessing, which I suspect he would give. Is that something you're interested in?"

"Yes."

"Then, once Bright Week is over, we'll talk to Father Nicholas about it."

"How would I join the choir?" Alyssa asked.

"I can take care of that," Elizaveta said. "Let me talk to Mrs. Filipov, but I'm sure she'll be happy to have you join."

"Awesome!"

We had a great time eating and talking, and about ninety minutes later, I saw the older men heading outside, so I encouraged the guys who were at the table to join us outside. Clark, Larry, Carter, and Gene all accepted cigars, but I refused. I wasn't going to get into the habit, even if it was just once a year.

"You should try a stogie, White Boy," Clark said. "They're a great way to celebrate."

"And a great way to get lung cancer," I retorted. "Granted, once in a while means a lower risk, but I'd rather not take any."

"He has a good point," Doctor Evgeni said. "That's the reason I quit smoking many years ago!"

"But Evgeni is kind enough not to rub our noses in it," Mr. Belyakov said, then puffed his cigar.

"And I promise to leave all the nagging to your wives!" I grinned, holding up my bottle of Mountain Dew as if to offer a toast.

"You see," Viktor laughed, "I told you he would make an excellent deacon!"

"He'll get his soon enough!" Mr. Belyakov said with a wink.

"Nagging? Or..." Mr. Loginov asked with a smirk but didn't complete the sentence due to the stern look he got from Viktor. "Sorry, Viktor Nikolay'ich, I meant no disrespect."

"I apologize as well," Mr. Belyakov said.

Viktor nodded and puffed his cigar. It wasn't as if it was any secret what would happen on my wedding night, but decorum was important. The men finished their cigars, and someone produced a bottle of vodka. I nodded when I was offered the first drink but then politely refused any others, and once the drinking began in earnest, I went back inside to find Elizaveta.

LVIII. Bright Week

April 15, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"How are you feeling, Petrovich?" Clarissa asked when she came to my door on Monday morning after I'd run and prayed.

"Fine. I slept like a log last night! What did Abby think?"

"She was pretty awestruck by the service and had a good time at the party. Everyone else seemed to have a great time, too."

"I think Clark made some new friends," I chuckled.

"He spent like three hours with the old men smoking and drinking!"

"So did Gene. Did Jocelyn have to pour him into bed?"

"Pretty much! Fortunately, a number of our friends don't drink much, so everyone had a sober ride back to campus. I don't remember, but how long do you have now until you fast again?"

"It's 'Party until Pentecost!'" I chuckled. "It's really only until Ascension if you follow the strictest rules, but Bishop ARKADY grants general «ekonomia» until Pentecost. And he's granted complete «ekonomia» from fasting for our trip to Europe. In fact, according to Father Nicholas, it was a command!"

"He wants you to have plenty of energy to satisfy your *pussy* cat!" Clarissa teased.

"He's celibate!" I protested.

"Which means exactly zero about him knowing what will happen on your honeymoon!"

"True," I chuckled.

We left my room and joined most of the gang to head to the cafeteria for breakfast.

"Mike," Melody said. "The Student Life committee approved your request to hold a service on Thursdays."

"Cool!" I replied. "Any concerns?"

"No. Basically, if they let the Bible Church have a Bible study here, they can't really deny anyone else, and given it's a State university, they can't censor speech based on content."

"And the Gay and Lesbian Student Alliance?" Robby sneered. "What about that?"

"It'll be renewed at the next meeting," Melody said. "As I explained, one of the members used a procedural maneuver to prevent a vote. They can't win in the end. All they did was delay approval of the renewal for a month, and it wouldn't be active until the Fall anyway. And it'll be funded from our activity fees like every other student group."

"And the protestors who showed up?" he asked disgustedly.

"Honestly? Fuck them! I know we have the votes. And speaking of votes, they're going to need a new Student Delegate next year, so if you're interested, you should apply. Obviously, those of you graduating next month can't do it, but Robby, Lee, Jocelyn, Lara, Dona, Sarah, Gene, or the rest of you could serve."

"There isn't an election?" Gene asked.

"No. This isn't Student Government. I had to stand for election for that spot. The Student Life Committee is appointed by the Chancellor."

"Go for it, Lee," Robby said.

"I think you should, Lee," Sophia added.

"How much work is it?" he asked.

"One meeting a month, and you just need to read the documents before the meeting. Mostly, it's approving new clubs, closing old ones, and proposing discipline for violations of the rules. And there has only been one of those, and it was dealt with a letter of reprimand."

"What did they do?"

"Failed to turn in their financial reports three months in a row. It was just laziness; there wasn't any funny business."

"Let me think about it, but I'll probably apply."

"You need two recommendations from faculty, but you're an honors student, so I'm sure that's a piece of cake."

"And you know Doctor Blahnik," I said. "Talk to her; she'll likely recommend you."

"I hate to think about what happens if she ever leaves," Jeannette said. "She's the most pro-student member of the faculty!"

"We hope Milena stays here," I said. "She's following in her mother's footsteps."

"We're all going to be gone in three years," Sarah said. "It's somebody else's problem at that point!"

"That's a really bad way to look at it," Melody declared. "We want to leave the school in better shape than we found it and ensure students who come here in the future are treated respectfully and as adults."

"Speaking of that, is that stupid dean coming back?" Dona asked.

I shook my head, "Not according to Chancellor Evans. The only openings for next Fall are for a professor in the history department and for a lecturer in the math department. Well, given Father Jacobs is being reassigned, there is also a need for a Latin professor and for someone to teach World Religions. There are no administrative positions open."

"That's the same thing I heard in the Student Government meeting last week," Melody confirmed. "Rumor has it that she has a position at a college in San Diego for next Fall."

"I heard out east or Chicago," I said. "Obviously, the rumor mills need to talk to each other!"

Everyone laughed at that.

Later that day, after our last class, Clarissa and I were sitting in my room when Jocelyn came by to let me know her surgery had been scheduled for June 3rd. She had just finished telling me when we heard a serious commotion in the hallway.

"What's that?" I asked.

Jocelyn took a step back and looked down the hallway.

"Vickie and Will are having another lovers' spat."

"Those two should just break up," Clarissa said. "They've been fighting for a week!"

"I missed that," I said.

"You've been in church, Petrovich!"

"I suppose I should go talk to them," I said.

I got up from the couch and went out into the hallway with Jocelyn and Clarissa following me. I'd taken only three steps down the hallway when Vickie slapped Will across the face, and to my shock, he punched her hard, knocking her down. My walk turned to a sprint, and I positioned myself between them.

"Will, back off," I growled.

"She hit me first!" he protested.

"I don't care if she hit you first, second, and third!" I declared emphatically.

"Hitting a woman is NOT acceptable!"

"Yeah, asshole!" Vickie screeched.

"Vickie, come with us," Clarissa said.

They helped her up, and I took Will's arm and gently moved him down the hall towards his room.

"You need to cool off," I said quietly. "And figure out what you're going to say to Dean Anderson."

"You're going to turn me in?!" he gasped.

"I have to report it," I replied.

He wrested his arm away from me, and my reflexes kicked in and I was able to easily block the roundhouse punch he threw.

"Don't," I commanded. "You're just going to make it worse."

Pete and Jason were coming down the hall and had seen the thrown punch. Pete grabbed Will from behind and pinned his arms to his side.

"Mike, Jason, and I have this," Pete said. "Go call the Dean."

I turned and went to find Clarissa and Jocelyn and discovered they'd taken Vickie into my room because she was bleeding from a cut under her eye, which I was sure was going to have a heck of a shiner very soon.

"Where's Will?" Jocelyn asked.

"Pete and Jason have him in custody. I need to call Dean Anderson and Campus Security."

"Don't!" Vickie protested. "He'll be expelled!"

"Mike, do it," Clarissa said firmly. "Vickie, we saw it happen. Mike HAS to report it."

"It was just a dumb fight," she said, sounding panicked.

I really didn't have any choice, given there were a few other people in the hallway who had seen the punch and heard the argument. I picked up the phone and dialed Dean Anderson's office. Vickie screamed at me to stop, but I didn't have any choice. Dean Anderson's secretary put me right through to her, and I explained what had happened. She told me to call Campus Security, who would call the McKinley Police, and she said she'd be right over. I hung up and did as she instructed, and five minutes later, Dean Anderson and a Campus Police Officer were in my room.

"Where's the assailant?" Officer Brown asked.

"A couple of the guys took him back to his room. They should be in 811."

"Bill, wait for the McKinley PD, please," Dean Anderson said.

He nodded and went into the hallway. A couple of minutes later, two uniformed officers, one male and one female, stepped off the elevator. They conferred with Dean Anderson and Officer Brown, and then the female officer asked to use my room to talk to Vickie while the two men went down the hall. I agreed, and Clarissa, Jocelyn, and I stepped out into the hall, followed by Dean Anderson. We moved to the common area and sat down.

"What happened, exactly?" Dean Anderson asked.

"Clarissa and I were in my room, and Jocelyn was in the doorway when we heard a commotion. I asked Jocelyn what was going on and she said Will and Vickie were having another lovers' spat. You know I haven't been around much

the past week because of church, so I didn't know they were having relationship problems. Anyway, I went out into the hall to talk to them and I saw Vickie slap Will across the face, and in return, he punched her in the face, and you saw the results."

"Then what?"

"I hurried and stood between him and where she was on the floor and told him it was inappropriate to hit a woman and asked him to go to his room. He resisted, so I grabbed his arm and started moving him down the hall. He broke loose, and Jason and Pete, who were coming down the hall, grabbed him and took him to his room."

"You left out the part where he took a swing at you," Jocelyn said firmly. "And that you blocked his punch, and THAT is why Jason and Pete grabbed him."

"Is that the case, Mike?" Doctor Anderson asked.

"Yes. But he didn't actually hit me, and I never felt threatened."

"Yes, but if he says the guys grabbed him, that's important. Please don't leave out details like that."

"Sorry," I replied. "I figured he was in enough trouble as it was."

"Oh, he is. I'll have an expulsion order drawn up immediately, and we'll get a restraining order to keep him off campus. Well, assuming he can make bail because given the cut and the obvious soon-to-be black eye, he'll be charged with felony battery."

"She might not press charges," Clarissa said. "She panicked when she realized Mike was going to call you. She begged him not to."

Doctor Anderson considered for a moment, "Do you think she might be pregnant?"

"They've been sleeping together," Jocelyn replied. "So it's certainly possible."

"That would explain her behavior for sure," Clarissa added. "I mean, for the past week."

"How so?" Dean Anderson asked.

"She's been out of sorts, and they've had three or four fights, though they were in his or her room, not in the hallway."

"OK," Dean Anderson said. "They're both over eighteen, so it really isn't my business or the university's business, but it would explain what appears to be irrational behavior. They're both good students, right?"

I nodded, "Until today, I would have said they were perfect Rickenbacker 8 material -- they studied hard, didn't drink much, didn't smoke, didn't do drugs, and avoided public displays of affection."

"But paired up like pretty much everyone else on the floor!" Dean Anderson said with a smile.

Clarissa, Jocelyn, and I all laughed.

"My girlfriend lives off campus," Clarissa said with a smirk. "And so does Mike's fiancée."

"Hey, nerds need love, too!" I declared with a smile. "We're just circumspect about it!"

"Mike," Dean Anderson said, "you'll need to sign the report once it's written so I can attach it to the expulsion order."

"What about her slapping him?" I asked.

"That's going to depend on everything else that happened. It's unlikely the police will act on that. Now, if she'd clocked him with a frying pan or a baseball bat, then it would be different. But the police and the courts give women serious leeway for a slap across the face. I'm sure you can imagine why."

"I can. Doesn't he have a right to appeal the expulsion?"

"Yes, of course. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, but the Student Handbook is clear and direct about physical violence. There is zero tolerance."

"I wasn't implying he'd win, just that the expulsion order isn't final until the appeal is denied or the appeal period expires."

"That's true, but if he's arrested and charged with a violent crime, the appeal can be automatically denied. And that's been tested in court at another State school."

"Dean Anderson?" the female police officer called out.

The dean got up and walked over to talk to the police officer.

"She's not going to press charges," Jocelyn said, *sotto voce*. "I can see it in the cop's face."

"What about all the witnesses?" Clarissa asked, her voice equally low.

"I'm not sure. I'm still pre-law, so take this with a grain of salt, but the police could arrest him and charge him based on witness statements. Then, it's up to the prosecutor to decide whether to take it to the Grand Jury for an indictment or not. If she won't testify, they still have all of us who saw it. And we could be forced to go before the Grand Jury and testify, and there is pretty much no way to avoid that. That said, I've only had a couple of classes on criminal justice, so as I said, take it with a grain of salt."

Dean Anderson came back to where we were.

"She's refusing medical care and refusing to press charges. The police want to talk to you three and probably the two guys who took Will to his room."

It took two hours for the five of us to talk to the officers, and in the end, they led Will away in handcuffs over Vickie's protests. Clarissa, Jocelyn, Pete, Jason, Gene, and I went to dinner, and after dinner, I went to Dean Anderson's office to sign the report. She told me Will had been charged with battery and would go before a judge in the morning to set bail. Beyond that, it was up to the County Prosecutor.

"Charged with battery and has a bail hearing in the morning," I said to Jocelyn, Clarissa, and Gene when I returned to the dorm. "Then it's up to the County Prosecutor."

"Can he come back if they drop the charges?" Gene asked.

"He'd have to challenge the expulsion," I replied, "and the Student Handbook doesn't even require an arrest. There are sufficient witnesses that he'd lose a hearing in front of the disciplinary board."

"What a way to throw away your life," he said. "Just the one charge? Not attempted assault on you or whatever?"

"That would be up to the Prosecutor, I guess," I replied. "They only need the one charge to arrest him."

"And just a month to go," Gene said, shaking his head. "Have you had any trouble in the past?"

"On my watch? One diabetic coma, a pot bust, one couple doing whippets where she passed out, and some minor stuff. I wasn't kidding when I called us all nerds!"

"Speak for yourself!" Jocelyn exclaimed.

"Right, Miss Goody Two-Shoes, who never got in trouble a single day in her life! You're as nerdy as I am!"

"You aren't nerdy!" Gene protested.

Clarissa laughed, "You didn't know Mike when he first got here. Or me. We were both consummate nerds. Seriously, the kids on this floor probably study more than any two other floors put together! And speaking of which, shall we study?"

We all got our books and joined our study groups, making my point.



April 16, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday, it was warm enough, and the golf course was in good enough shape that Viktor and I played nine holes. I was very rusty, but he was patient and offered only the most basic advice, trying his best to make it enjoyable, even though I was slightly frustrated.

"It'll get better, Mike," he said as we walked back to the Clubhouse. "Once you come back from Europe, we'll play a couple of times a week."

"I'll check with my appointment secretary on that," I chuckled.

Viktor laughed, "I promise not to try to make my daughter a 'golf widow'. Remember, this is a very good way to get to know the 'movers and shakers' in the community -- doctors, lawyers, businessmen, politicians -- and a very good way to relax."

"It's still a bit frustrating," I replied.

"You're just rusty, Mike. As I said, when you play more, you'll get better."

"And I think I can do without politicians!"

He laughed, "A not uncommon sentiment."

We stowed our clubs, changed our shoes, and went into the dining room, where we were seated at our usual table.

"May I ask why your friend Clark calls you 'White Boy'?"

I chuckled, "Because I AM a 'White Boy'! But seriously, he grew up in a rough neighborhood in Cincinnati, and I'm the first white friend he's had in his life. We were roommates for the first two years. He had a pretty bad attitude towards white people because he was harassed by white cops all through his teen years. I even saw it happen here in McKinley."

Viktor frowned, "Our Chief of Police isn't very enlightened. And there's a reason to get to know politicians, even if you don't necessarily like them -- to make sure

our NEXT Chief of Police isn't a throwback to the 50s. What happened with your friend?"

"The police took the word of a white kid over three black kids about an assault, and then someone later reported Clark, falsely, mind you, for being a drug dealer and a fence. Funny thing, though not funny, is the only kids who've been arrested at Taft over the past four years have all been white. But it seems as if every time something happens, the cops question the black kids."

"I read in the paper this morning there was an arrest for battery."

"On my floor of the dorm. I think the police would call it a 'domestic dispute' if the couple were married. A guy and a girl were having what appeared to be a lovers' quarrel. According to Jocelyn and Clarissa, they'd been having relationship problems for about a week. I was unaware because I'd been at church so much. Anyway, he apparently said something to her, which caused her to slap him. In response, he punched her, hard, in the face."

"And you let him live?" Viktor asked, sounding serious.

"I don't think violence solves anything, one way or the other."

"Spoken like a true clergyman. And while I am sure nothing of the sort would ever happen, you do realize what would occur if you were ever to strike my daughter, right?"

I nodded, "I do, but that's simply never going to happen, so there's nothing to worry about."

"As I said, I'm sure it won't, but I think you might have a slightly different opinion if someone struck your little sister or your daughter."

Actually, it was worse because Liz had been raped by a classmate, his brother, and their friends.

"I'd let the police deal with it, Viktor Nikolay'ich," I replied. "And that would be true even if I weren't clergy."

"So what happened?"

"I stepped between them, and he took a swing at me, which I blocked. I'm sure you remember I took karate lessons for several years before I ran out of time. At that point, my friends Pete and Jason grabbed him and took him to his room while Clarissa and Jocelyn helped the girl. I called the Dean of Students and the Campus Police. The short story is that after talking to everyone, the police arrested the guy for battery. He was supposed to have a bail hearing this morning, but I don't know what happened. He was banned from campus, and the Dean expelled him based on the Student Handbook rules about physical violence. She had five witnesses to what happened, so the expulsion will stick."

"And the girl?"

"According to Dean Anderson, there's quite a bit of leeway for a girl to slap a guy and not suffer any punishment at all. I think you can understand why."

Viktor nodded, "Yes, I can. Well, enough about that! Are there any problems or anything that I can help with?"

I shook my head, "No. Your wife, mother, and mother-in-law have everything well in hand, and we're just counting down the days, though I'm more concerned about finals and graduation than wedding planning!"

Viktor laughed, "Most men don't give two figs about wedding planning! It's best to stay out of what often amounts to a combat zone! Though in your case, you

and Elizaveta set a couple of rules and let the grandmothers do what they wanted, which pretty much prevents the usual set of disputes!"

"I find life is FAR easier if one simply allows the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*) to do things their way!" ("Grandmothers' Cabal")

"If you've learned that already, my soon-to-be son-in-law, you'll have a much easier life!"

"As Father Herman said many times, privately mind you, bishops do not cross the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*) for fear of their lives!" ("Grandmothers' Cabal")

"You know that in the Soviet Union, it is precisely the grandmothers who are keeping the faith alive. There was a question asked, back in the days of Stalin, about what would happen when those first grandmothers died. The reply was: there will be others to take our place. And that's been true for nearly seventy years now. When the day comes that the Communists are defeated, it will be those grandmothers who have preserved the faith for future generations. Even Stalin knew when he'd met his match!"

"It's self-preservation!" I said with a soft laugh. "Before I forget, our application to use a classroom for a Vespers service on Thursday evenings during the school year was approved. You should receive a letter later this week. Do we know who is going to lead the services?"

"For the first year, at least, it will be Father Nicholas. Mark and Alyssa will be at Taft, correct?"

"Yes. They already know Doctor Blahnik, the faculty sponsor, as we met at her house for catechism. They'll be valuable, though obviously, they need several

years in the church before they can take on a leadership role. Mark did ask about being an acolyte, and I'll talk to Father Nicholas about that next weekend."

"He's eighteen?"

I chuckled, "I see how your mind works! It's two years before he could even be considered for ordination as a reader or subdeacon. One step at a time!"

"Yes, of course, but you know we're always looking out for future clergy. We'll give him some time to settle in. And being an acolyte is a good way to do that."

"Alyssa is going to join the choir."

"Very good! You did an excellent job bringing them into the Church, Subdeacon! Her parents are coming regularly now as well."

I nodded, "I think we'll see them become catechumens in the next few months. They've been befriended by the Johnsons and were sitting with them and their friends at the Pascha party."

"Good! And hopefully our outreach on campus will bring in more inquirers. Are any of your friends likely to become catechumens?"

I shook my head, "I doubt it, but you never know how the Holy Spirit might work down the road."

"That's very true. I'd like to have a family dinner -- your parents and grandparents, your sister and her husband, and my wife and our parents early next month. I'll arrange it, but I wanted to check your schedule first."

"The only real limit I have is studying for final exams," I replied. "Those are the week before the wedding. Fortunately, this semester, they won't be too tough, so

any time before May 15th would be fine. Oh, except for the 3rd for a concert José and I are giving."

"OK. I'll call your grandfather and your dad and set it up. I take it things are OK between your sister and your dad?"

"OK enough," I replied. "There won't be any trouble."

We had our usual nice dinner, and after we'd eaten, I headed back to campus for study group.

"You won't believe what I heard!" Lara said as I sat down next to Clarissa.

"What's that?"

"Vickie paid Will's bail!"

"I'd say that means she's pregnant," Jocelyn said.

"She is!" Sarah declared. "The reason she slapped him was because he asked if it might be somebody else's baby."

"Suddenly, everything makes sense," Sandy said. "Well, minus him hitting her!"

"I'd say accusing her of sleeping with someone else certainly warranted her slapping him," Dona said. "Seriously, who does that?"

"A guy who is freaked out by a pregnant girlfriend," Jason said. "Not excusing her, but asking if your girlfriend slept with another guy is pretty low unless you have serious evidence."

"You mean like her being pregnant?" Pete asked.

"Maybe if you weren't sleeping with her, but otherwise? Wouldn't you assume it was yours unless you had evidence?"

"I'm not sure I'd be rational if Sandy told me she was pregnant!"

"I'm not sure I would be rational if I discovered I was pregnant!" Sandy exclaimed.

"Which explains what happened," I said. "And why she didn't want to press charges. And why she bailed him out."

"Even if the charges are dropped, he can't come back to school," Melody declared. "Only an actual acquittal could get him back in. A private school could ignore an acquittal, but not a State school. If he were to be acquitted, they'd have to let him back in."

"Do you think they'll drop the charges?" Clarissa asked.

"Given what we know," Melody said, "I suspect the prosecutor won't want to go to trial. He might just drop the charges or maybe get Will to agree to plead guilty to a misdemeanor with probation and a chance to have the conviction expunged in the future. That wouldn't ruin Will's life and would let the prosecutor show he had taken action against someone who struck a woman."

"I'm not sure you need to go to Yale," I observed. "Why not just take the Bar?"

"Because most states require you to have a law degree in addition to passing the Bar. New York doesn't, for example, but they do require one year of law school and then what amounts to an apprenticeship, IF you can find one. And law school helps prepare for the Bar."

"Haven't you basically done an apprenticeship with your uncle?"

"Yes, but Ohio isn't one of those states that allow that. Would you like to take your medical licensing exam without medical school?"

"You can't even take it until you've completed at least part of your Residency," I replied. "So, medical school and what amounts to an apprenticeship. I'm not sure it's possible to skip medical school, either, because of the way the NBME part exams work. I never looked, actually. That said, in Europe, you mostly have a six-year medical degree rather than an undergrad and four years of medical school. They, in effect, do away with two years of medical school, which is almost all classroom, and cover everything from undergrad and those two years in the first four. Basically, if we could have skipped our electives, we could have done the same kind of thing, if it were allowed, which it's not. And I'm glad I took my electives, frankly."

"Even the computer class?" Kristin asked.

"Even that one," I replied grudgingly. "You know Fran and I are using the computers to create our lab reports."

"Another convert!" she teased.

"Never!" I declared. "Let's study!"



April 18, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Three more labs, and we're done!" Fran said when we met in the computer lab on Thursday morning.

"Three after this one!" I corrected.

"Yes, Mr. Pedantic!"

"Did you and Jason find a place?"

"The married dorms," she replied.

"Seriously?!"

"It's practical, and it's not like there is any chance we're not going to marry!"

"Duh!" I chuckled. "File that one under 'Not News'! But I thought you were determined to wait!"

"We were, but the numbers work so much better in the married dorms, especially given the deal Jason gets for being a TA and working on Doctor Stanton's research project. It just didn't make sense to do anything else, and that basically forced our hand. But it was going to happen eventually."

"When?"

"That's a matter of some debate. Jason and I thought about just going to the courthouse, but my mom vetoed that idea. And my parents are contributing enough towards med school that her veto matters. So I guess the end of July. Mom is trying to make arrangements."

"I have a strong sense of self-preservation, so I washed my hands of that whole thing and left it to Elizaveta's grandmothers."

"I did tell her that anything more than the cost of the license and whatever fee the judge would receive was on her. Jason and I are not spending a dime, and it's not

like we're going to have room for lots of gifts in what amounts to an efficiency apartment the university has in the married dorms."

"True. I'm assuming kids are after med school?"

"Probably after PGY2. I don't see anything else as being practical. Sandy and Sophia agree with me on that."

"I think they're right because neither medical school nor Residency makes any real accommodations. I think that's wrong, but nobody asked my opinion when they created the system!"

"By men for men," Fran said, shaking her head. "Promise me you'll help change that!"

"I'll do my best," I replied. "You do remember who my best friend is, right?"

"I do. You're pretty close to Sandy and Sophia as well."

"And you, though it's a bit different."

Fran laughed softly, "Yeah, because I didn't sleep with you!"

"Not just that!" I protested. "We're friends, sure, but we're colleagues the way we'll be with other doctors. This has actually been good practice for the future."

"Not to mention the good grades we've been getting!"

"We owe Clarissa for the formal study group idea."

"Agreed. Shall we get to work?"

Just under three hours later, we left the computer lab, freshly printed lab reports in hand, and headed back to the dorm to join the gang for lunch. After lunch, I got my guitar and music and went to meet Doctor Blahnik for my weekly lesson. She was there waiting and had brought the balalaika as she usually did.

"Four arrests on campus in the four years you've been here, and three of them in your dorm!" she said with a smile.

"To be fair, one of them was on another floor," I replied. "I'm assuming you heard the whole story?"

"Yes, and it's one of those times when you have to wonder if the rules aren't a bit too rigid. Don't get me wrong, I am NOT condoning anyone hitting anyone else, but the situation was extremely stressful. She's not pressing charges, and they have a huge challenge ahead of them, so some discipline short of expulsion might be warranted. But I also understand why the rules are the way they are."

"I can't imagine a situation so stressful that I'd hit a guy, let alone a girl," I replied. "Hitting a woman under any circumstances is just beyond the pale."

"It's your gentle nature. You used to take karate, and I'm sure there were girls in your classes. How did you handle that?"

"Both instructors always paired us with someone of the same sex for sparring."

"Interesting. Shall we get started?"

We spent about half the time on the balalaika and the other half on some complex classical guitar chords. At the end of the practice session, I packed up both instruments and slung the balalaika over my shoulder as usual.

"Are you going to be here on Saturday morning?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm curious, would you consider singing one song as a group at your concert on the 4th?"

"We've only practiced a couple of times and only a couple of songs. If we did, it would have to be *Piano Man*, I think, because all of us know it well and José and I have been practicing it for the concert. He plays harmonica, too."

"Please consider it."

"So we can have even MORE pressure to play?" I asked. "I'm going to be totally unavailable to practice from the week before finals through the end of July."

"I think Elizaveta is right in that it will help you relax."

"Ganging up on me now, are you?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

"You're the one who suggested piano lessons with Milena! I just happened to speak to her."

"Uh-huh," I replied accusingly. "Just happened to?"

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "I would have thought by now you would realize that women are always in charge!"

"Oh, I know! I just didn't realize how vast the conspiracy OUTSIDE the Church was!"

"When are you going to practice your wedding song together?"

"She told me she's ready, so probably starting next weekend. This weekend is her birthday, and her friends are throwing a party tomorrow night, and her family is celebrating on Saturday."

"Are you heading to the house to practice the balalaika?"

"Yes."

"OK. I'll see you Saturday morning."

"See you then."

I left the music room and headed to Doctor Blahnik's house. I stopped short when I turned the corner because Clarissa was sitting on the steps that led up to the front porch.

"Hi, Lissa," I said when I walked up.

"I came to listen to you practice! And I'd like some private time with you afterwards."

"Is there a problem?"

She smiled and shook her head, "No. We don't even have to talk, just sit together and listen to music."

"Hugs?"

"As many as I can have without potentially upsetting your *pussy* cat!"

"One of these days, you're going to slip up and say that in front of her!"

Clarissa laughed softly, "As if she doesn't know the double meaning? Did anything come of Yuliana's teasing?"

"Elizaveta didn't say anything at church last night, but I'll see Yuliana tomorrow night at the birthday party the girls are throwing for Elizaveta."

"I guess you aren't the only Orthodox kid who doesn't follow that teaching!"

"I told you what the priest said, but you might be reading too much into a silly comment."

"Or not! Shall we go in?"

"Yes!"



April 19, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday, after Russian Literature, I headed to Elizaveta's house, arriving just before she arrived home from school. I waited in the driveway and she greeted me with a hug and kiss when she walked up, and then we went inside. She took her books up to her room, changed her clothes, and came back downstairs.

"How was school today?" I asked.

"The girls surprised me with cupcakes at lunchtime! It was like when we were in first or second grade, and you brought cupcakes for the class."

"That was sweet of them. Did anything happen to 'Yulechka' because of what she said at Pascha?"

Elizaveta laughed softly, "She got the 'prim, proper, and modest' talk and the 'ladylike behavior' talk. I'm sure you've heard them because you have a sister but also because you dated Tasha."

"I might have heard them once or twice!" I allowed with a silly grin.

"It's not like she's done much, really. Just making out and stuff."

"It's the 'and stuff' that will make her mom upset!"

"And besides, it's not like I don't know what we're going to do on our wedding night! And speaking of that, I started taking my birth control pills on Wednesday."

"Good! I think EVERYONE knows what we're going to do on our wedding night! I told you about Mr. Belyakov and Mr. Loginov. And your dad's reaction."

"Those dirty old men have been flirting with young girls forever!"

I chuckled, "Just like Mr. Zhuravlyov! But they're all harmless because their wives would castrate them if they stepped one inch over the line. Flirting and teasing are tolerated, but that's the absolute limit."

"Learn that now, husband!" Elizaveta declared.

"I don't really flirt," I replied. "I never have. And you know I'll be wearing a cassock at church."

"Yes, and a doctor's coat at the hospital with all those cute nurses!"

"I only have eyes for you, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)!" ("Kitten")

"It's not your eyes I want right now!" she said fiercely.

"You're still fifteen!" I chuckled. "Not to mention the promises we made."

"I'm only fifteen for another eight hours!"

"That solves the 'underage' problem, but not the other one! Five weeks from Sunday."

"You're mean!"

"Would you prefer the bishop decline to ordain me? And what exactly would you tell your dad when he asked why? Or my grandfather?"

She screwed up her face and gave me 'that' look which meant she knew I was right but didn't want to admit it.

"It's just not fair!" she protested.

"Says the young woman who will be marrying at age sixteen! And marrying the man she wants, and who she, in effect, ordered to marry her!"

"Careful, husband!" she warned.

"See," I replied with a silly grin, "in order for you to get what you so badly want, I know you can't REALLY do anything to me!"

"We shall see!" she declared fiercely but with a twinkle in her eye.

LIX. Sweet Sixteen

April 19, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

Elizaveta drove my car to Pizza Inn, where her friends had reserved the small banquet room for the party. She'd be taking her driving test on Thursday and wanted a bit more practice. I was sure she'd pass, but with BMV employees, one never knew what might happen. When we arrived, Elizaveta backed into the parking spot just as I'd taught her, and after locking up the car, we went inside to where ten of her friends and their boyfriends or girlfriends were waiting, along with Mark and Alyssa and Tasha and Nik. We'd invited Clarissa, but Abby wasn't gung-ho about spending the evening with a group of mostly High School Sophomores and Juniors, so Clarissa had declined.

I knew most of the girls who were there -- Oksana, Britney, Johanna, Serafima, and Viktoriya, who had been at lunch that day at Elizaveta's, along with Yuliana and Angelina from church. She introduced me to the other three girls -- Suzie, Carol, and Hope, who were other friends from school. I didn't bother with the boys' names as I noticed three of the four who had been at lunch that day had been replaced.

"Do we have to behave with Subdeacon here?" Yuliana asked with a silly smile.

"I'm not going to report you to your mom for saying that my future wife is going to enjoy our wedding night!"

I saw Nik grimace, but I also saw Tasha's hand on his arm. She was working on him to loosen up, and I was absolutely sure his attitude would change in a major way near the end of July. If his wedding night was anything like the 'wedding night' I'd had with Tasha, he wasn't going to know which end was up!

"I got a lecture about 'ladylike' behavior. I swear, she's still living in Russia!"

"No, that's MY dad," Tasha declared. "You don't speak Russian at home, and I bet you don't have a picture of the Tsar in your house!"

"No."

"And talk to your grandmother," I said.

"I did!" Yuliana exclaimed. "That was a fun conversation! But if I tell my mom what my grandmother said, my mom will lose her mind!"

A bunch of us laughed.

"I'm not surprised," I said. "And do not share, please. That's private between you and your grandmother."

"I'll tell you now, and you'll see later, she helped me pick out Elizaveta's birthday present!"

The twinkle in Yuliana's eyes implied that it was going to be an interesting gift. She stood up and tapped her glass with a knife.

"They're going to bring in salads for everyone first, then there will be three kinds of pizza, plus lasagna and spaghetti with meatballs, all served family style. Everything is covered by what I collected from you, including the pitchers of soft drinks. Enjoy!"

The salads were brought in, and Yuliana asked me to give the blessing.

"O Lord, bless the food and drink of Thy servants, for Thou art holy unto the ages of ages."

Everyone responded, "Amen!"

"Christ is risen!" I exclaimed.

"Truly He is risen!" everyone replied heartily.

Thirty minutes later, with everyone having eaten their fill of salad, pizza, lasagna, and spaghetti, Yuliana stood up and once again tapped her glass with her knife.

"Mike, Tasha, would you please lead us in *Happy Birthday* and *Many Years*?"

I nodded, and we both stood up and moved next to each other. I hummed two notes, one for her and one for me, Tasha nodded, and we began, with the group joining in for both songs.

"Now, we have a few gifts for you," Yuliana said. "Mike?"

I reached into my shirt pocket, pulled out a soft jewelry bag, and handed it to Elizaveta. She opened the drawstrings and extracted a long, gold chain with a heart on it.

"Why is it so long?" Elizaveta asked.

Tasha giggled, which was something of a rarity for her, "It's a waist chain!"

She knew because she had been the one to suggest it, privately, of course. I wondered what Nik thought, but that was between Tasha and him.

"So I'm supposed to just take off my blouse right here and put it on?" she asked petulantly.

"No!" Yuliana tittered. "You wear it under your wedding dress..."

The rest of the girls laughed, and the guys all looked disappointed that they weren't going to see her put it on. I, on the other hand, certainly would! And the look exchanged between Tasha and Yuliana told me that, at a minimum, Yuliana was involved in making the suggestion. And if they were like this in public, Elizaveta's bridal shower was going to be very interesting, and unfortunately, I wouldn't be allowed to attend.

"Thank you," Elizaveta said to me, then winked and kissed my cheek.

Several of the other girls had gifts for Elizaveta as well -- a pair of sweaters, neither of which were like the one I'd purchased, some scented candles, and a nice shoulder bag, which I was sure would be useful on our trip to Europe. Yuliana handed Elizaveta the final gift, and Elizaveta removed the wrapping paper and opened the box, blushing deep crimson upon seeing the see-through purple lingerie.

"For your wedding night," Yuliana tittered.

"Show us!" Oksana, Serafima, and Viktoriya demanded in unison something which was clearly planned in advance.

Elizaveta blushed even deeper, something I wouldn't have thought possible, and held up a very sexy, sheer 'babydoll' negligée. Left in the box were equally sheer panties. All the girls applauded, and the guys' eyes bugged out. I thought I might have a heart attack when I saw Elizaveta wearing them, which would defeat the entire purpose!

"No advance peeks!" Yuliana teased. "You have to wait until five weeks from tomorrow!"

"You're just no fun!" Elizaveta replied with a silly smile, returning the garment to the box and putting the lid on.

I leaned close and whispered into her ear, "But I bet you are!"

She giggled softly, then kissed my cheek, "Just wait!"

A few minutes later, everyone was served dessert -- a brownie topped with a scoop of ice cream with fudge drizzled over it. When we'd finished eating our dessert, all the girls hugged Elizaveta. Yuliana promised to take the gifts to Elizaveta's house, and then Elizaveta and I left so I could take her to see *Ladyhawke*. We both very much enjoyed the film, which had a wonderful score and featured gallant knights, fair maidens in distress, and bad guys who made you want to do them in yourself. I very much enjoyed the fantasy of a world where chivalry -- love, honor, and courage -- were rewarded.

"I loved it!" Elizaveta gushed when we left the theatre. "True love which conquers all and where the two love each other more than life itself!"

I took her hand, and we walked back towards Pizza Inn, where we'd left my car.

"Despite their curse of lycanthropy?"

"You mean changing into animals?"

"Yes."

"But it was broken at the end, and they were together through all the adversity!"

"That's true. I very much liked the contrast between Navarre's faith and the pure evil of the Bishop of Aquila."

"Even though it portrayed clergy in a poor light?"

"More so than the icon of The Last Judgment, which shows clergy, including bishops, in Hell? Father Herman, in one of his homilies, relayed a story about a monk who visited hell and saw his former abbot up to his neck in fire, and when he wept for the abbot, the abbot said not to weep only for him but also for their former bishop on whose shoulders the abbot was standing."

"I suppose not, no. Does that worry you?"

"Constantly," I replied. "You know my past failings."

"But properly confessed and with appropriate repentance, right?"

"I believe so, yes, but we're all pretty good at deceiving ourselves."

"But you're not saying you have no sin!" she protested.

I nodded, "1 John 1:8. But I think it goes deeper than just denying our sins to the core issue -- do we truly acknowledge them, and are we truly repentant? If you go back two verses, John writes, *'If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth'*, and that informs his statement that *'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'*. He goes on to say, *'If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us'*, and taking all of that together, not being properly repentant is not all that different from denying that we've sinned. And remember, I KNEW that what I was doing was sinful, and yet I did it anyway."

"Doesn't Paul teach that sometimes we're unable to resist our desire to sin?"

I nodded, "He does, but don't you think that could be used as a cop-out? You know, I'm not able to control myself, so it's OK? Or thinking that you can, in effect, get away with it because of that."

"I would say that if you confessed, and Father Nicholas didn't feel your confessions were heartfelt and that you were truly struggling, he would never have told the bishop he supported your ordination."

"Yes, but don't you think it's possible that clergy do things with less than pure motives? Or do things which might not be perfectly theologically sound to keep the peace and for the overall good of the church?"

"Wait! You don't think you're qualified to be a deacon?!"

"I've NEVER thought I was qualified to be a deacon, a subdeacon, or a reader. The bishop, Father Herman, Father Nicholas, my grandfather, and your father all thought I was. As did the Parish Council when they petitioned to have me ordained a deacon as soon as I married. I didn't seek any of this, ever. Not even to be an acolyte. Father Herman asked me one day, and I agreed out of obedience. The same was true when he made me head acolyte."

"Hang on! You don't WANT to be a deacon?"

"I'm being obedient to my bishop and using my gifts in the Church as best he sees fit."

"You would never say 'no' to him?"

"I objected, saying I wasn't worthy, and he made a point that nobody is worthy. You know we have but one High Priest, one bishop, if you will -- Jesus Christ. Vladyka ARKADY is an icon of Christ, just as the priests are when the bishop

isn't present, and only then if the *antimens* is on the altar. We serve as clergy not because we are worthy but because Christ is worthy. It's also the case that the Church rejected Donatism as a heresy -- the sacraments are neither degraded nor debased if the priest is a sinner. And that is because they derive their efficacy from the worthiness of Jesus Christ."

"Does anyone else know how you feel? I mean, besides Father Nicholas and the bishop?"

"My mom and I talked about this when, just after my ordination as a subdeacon, my dad said that I got what I wanted. My reply to him was that if he thought that, then he didn't know me at all. I also talked with Tasha about it when we were dating, and Clarissa because she's Clarissa."

"You love her very much, don't you?"

"I do."

"Would she convert?"

"You can't convert from being lesbian to being straight," I teased.

Elizaveta dropped my hand and smacked my arm, "You know what I meant!"

"No," I replied. "I don't think she would. And don't ask what she would do if she were straight because she's not and can't be. Remember we talked about desire, right?"

"Yes. And speaking of that, how did Tasha and Yuliana know what the chain was?"

"Tasha suggested it, and I'm guessing it was Yuliana's idea, but she didn't feel right coming to me directly."

Elizaveta laughed, "She is SO bad! That nighty is outrageous!"

"She's only bad in public, which you know very well is why she gave it to you tonight!"

"The boys' heads looked like they were going to explode!" Elizaveta said with a soft laugh.

"I noticed. I think they're all jealous because I'm marrying the most beautiful girl in the church!"

"Oh, please! That's Natalya Vasilyevna, and everyone knows it!"

"I disagree. YOU are the most beautiful girl in the entire church, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*). Period. End of discussion." ("Kitten")

"You really believe that?"

"I do because it's the truth!"

Elizaveta took my hand again and squeezed it. May 26th couldn't arrive soon enough for either of us.



April 20, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Good morning, Doctor Blahnik," I said when she came into the classroom.

"Good morning! And you know I expect you to start calling me Anicka once you graduate!"

"It just felt a bit too familiar while I was a student."

Her eyes twinkled, "Or not familiar enough..."

"You and your daughter are certainly cut from the same cloth!"

"Is that any surprise, really?"

"NO!" I chuckled.

José came in a moment later with Dona in tow, followed by Sticks and Kim. Elizaveta arrived just after them.

"I didn't realize we were inviting an audience!" Sticks said as he uncovered the drums.

"I made him bring me!" Dona declared. "Well, once I heard that Elizaveta was here last time."

Once we were all set up, we played through our repertoire of seven songs, though all of them were pretty ragged except *Piano Man*.

"I'd say mostly what you need is practice," Doctor Blahnik declared when we finished. "I think your rendition of *Piano Man* is very good."

"That's because it's simple!" José replied. "We also aren't using the full complement of instruments that Billy Joel used -- piano, harmonica, bass guitar, acoustic guitar, accordion, mandolin, and drums."

"My point is," Doctor Blahnik continued, "that you have the timing and instrumental harmony down for that song. I suggested to Mike, and I want to suggest to the four of you, that you do this one piece at some point during the concert which José and Mike are giving in two weeks."

"You can't be serious!" Sticks objected.

"Why?" Doctor Blahnik replied. "You sounded great! Just practice that one song. Call it a teaser for after Mike comes back from his European vacation!"

"I saw trailers for that movie," Kim interjected. "I just don't see Mike as Clark Griswald!"

"I didn't see the first one," I replied. "Slapstick just isn't my thing."

"Oh, man, you HAVE to see it if you can," Sticks said. "It was absolutely hilarious!"

"You really think we should do that, Doctor Blahnik?" Kim asked.

"I do. It'll be good for you to do a public performance, even if it's just one song. And it's one that's part of the normal sets Mike and José do."

"Then I'm in," Kim replied.

"Me, too," José said.

"Sticks?" I asked.

"What the hell? Why not?"

"Then I guess we'll do it," I replied.

"What about a name?" Sticks asked.

"I think 'Code Blue' is the best one," Kim said. "I have a cool royal blue miniskirt and blouse set I could wear. I guess Mike is going to wear scrubs?"

"I was thinking that, yes, and I can get blue scrubs."

"If we do that, I think I'm going to go for a DePaul basketball jersey," Sticks said. "The Blue Demons."

"If you don't mind the duplicate theme, I'm going to get a Chelsea football jersey," José said.

"Who?" I asked.

"They play in the top division in English football, what you call soccer. I have to see if I can get the sheet music for *Blue Is the Colour!*"

"Their fight song?" Sticks asked.

"Basically," José replied.

"How do you watch that here?"

"It's tough, but the Spanish-language option from the cable service carries games, and there's a bar which shows them on Saturday and Sunday mornings. They also get South American team games and some other European ones. ESPN has carried a few games on tape delay, but not many, and I don't think I've seen any recently."

"I've seen Australian Rules football on ESPN in the dorm," I said. "But I don't recall seeing any soccer."

"That's the crazy game with referees wearing butcher coats, right?" Sticks asked.

"Yeah," I chuckled. "And they don't wear body armor like you used to!"

"I wish! Or my knees do!"

"Let's run through everything again," José said. "And then we'll practice *Piano Man* for the rest of our time."

We did that, and by the time everyone else packed up their things, I thought we sounded pretty good for only having practiced on three occasions.

When everyone else left, Elizaveta and I stayed so we could practice *Up Where We Belong* with Elizaveta playing the piano and singing the female parts while I sang and played my guitar.

"May I make a critical observation?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

"Sure," I replied.

"I strongly prefer the version you did at my house where Milena played, and you two sang to each other. The instruments take away some of the chemistry and energy you had. Can we try it with me at the piano and you two just singing to each other?"

"It's up to you, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I said. ("Kitten")

"Let's try it Doctor Blahnik's way," she said, then lowered her voice, "it made me tingle!"

I had to use every ounce of self-control not to burst out laughing at Elizaveta's oblique way of describing the effect our singing had on her. She got up, and Doctor Blahnik sat down at the piano.

"Mike, the same way you sang *Just the Way You Are* with Milena, please."

I nodded and took both of Elizaveta's hands in mine, something I couldn't do when she was playing piano and hadn't done with Milena. I looked deeply into Elizaveta's eyes, and we waited as Doctor Blahnik played the intro. Elizaveta led off, and we sang the duet, holding hands and looking into each other's eyes the entire time. When we finished, Elizaveta threw her arms around me and put her lips to my ear.

"Mike," she demanded in a husky whisper, "I'm sixteen today! Take me somewhere and make love to me!"

I wanted to do exactly that, but the little angel on my right shoulder reminded me of my promise, and his voice was just slightly stronger than the combination of my own desire and the devil on my left shoulder encouraging me to do it.

"I think that answers the question!" Doctor Blahnik said with a soft laugh.

Elizaveta blushed, and her hand flew to her mouth.

"You said that just a bit too loud, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I soothed. "But you know we can't. Not yet." ("Kitten")

I got 'that' look with the screwed-up face, but I knew exactly how she felt, and I was struggling with my lengthy celibacy for the first time. The anticipation was going to kill both of us and if it didn't, our wedding night might!

"What you just did was, frankly, amazing," Doctor Blahnik said. "Either Milena or I can play at your wedding reception. You really should just sing."

I nodded, "I agree."

"Me, too," Elizaveta replied, flushed and her heart racing.

"May I make an additional suggestion?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

"Sure."

"Not before the wedding, but after, you should call Elizaveta up to the stage and sing this with the keyboards, guitar, and drums backing you. You'll bring down the house!"

"We'll think about it. We'll also have to clear that with the bishop."

"What could possibly be wrong with two people who are so obviously in love with each other singing?"

"How it might make other girls feel," I replied, realizing then that Doctor Blahnik was right in what she'd said.

"Unfortunately, I can see how that might cause problems," she agreed.

"Would you play for us?" I asked.

"Absolutely! I'll see you for your lesson on Thursday, if not before."

"Thanks," I replied.

I packed up my guitar and sheet music, took Elizaveta's hand, and we left the room.

"Can I ask you something?" Elizaveta inquired.

"Sure, but there's something I need to say to you first."

"OK."

I put down my guitar and the satchel with my music, took both of Elizaveta's hands in mine, and looked into her eyes.

"I love you," I said softly.

She smiled broadly, "I know."

I couldn't help but laugh, "Gee, thanks!"

"It was obvious when we were singing! And you have NO idea what that did to me!"

"Oh, I can guess!" I replied. "Five weeks!"

"Mean!" she declared.

I let go of one of her hands, picked up my things, and we started on our way to the dorm.

"What was your question?"

"Did you ever sing to a girl that way to try to get her into bed?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"And it worked, didn't it?"

"Yes."

Elizaveta frowned but then shook her head, "Thank you for answering truthfully. I promise I won't ever ask again. And I promise not to bring up this topic in the future."

"And if I hadn't answered?" I asked.

"I'd wonder what else you might be keeping from me. I'm sure there are other things, but the fact you answered without evading or protesting says I can trust you to be truthful."

"A test?"

"Not intentionally," she said quietly. "But I suppose it was, wasn't it?"

"It certainly seems like it," I agreed.

"Just promise you'll never sing like that to any other girl, ever!"

"I promise, though I do reserve the right to sing in a loving manner to our daughters!"

"Not like that!"

"No, of course not, but it would still be in a way I didn't sing to anyone else, including you."

"I think I can allow that exception!" she replied with a soft smile.

"Let's go back to the dorm so I can put my guitar and music away, then we'll head to your house for your party."

"When will you move your things?"

"During finals week. I'll only have two exams -- physical chemistry and statistics. The other two classes have papers due that week. A research paper on the treatment of mental illness for abnormal psych and a ten-page paper on Russian literature for Doctor Blahnik. I have outlines for both, and I've already written parts of them. That means I'll be free three of the five days that week to bring things to the cottage."

"OK. I'll start moving a few things next week -- my Winter clothes, and so on. I'll have everything there by the last week of school, which is the same as yours."

We arrived at the dorm and I went upstairs, put away my guitar, changed into clothes I would wear to church, then went back down to the lobby. I took Elizaveta's hand, and we walked to my car. I handed her the keys, and she drove us to the florist so I could get flowers for her mom and grandmothers, which was a typically Russian thing to do and which I knew they would appreciate. Elizaveta waited in the car while I bought the flowers, adding a perfect red rose for her to my purchase. When we arrived at her house, I handed flowers to her grandmothers and mom, and then the rose to her and shook hands with Viktor and the grandfathers. We went right to the dining room, where we'd spend the next six hours eating, drinking, and socializing before heading to church.

After appetizers, salad, and the main course, but before dessert, we sang *Many Years*, and Elizaveta opened her gifts. She loved the sweater I bought for her, and she received blouses, scarves, and some walking shoes, which would be very

useful in Europe and reminded me I needed to get a pair. The last gift was a complete surprise -- a small box containing a set of keys.

"Come to the driveway," Viktor said with a smile.

Everyone got up and followed him out of the house, where Zach Gleason was waiting with a Blue 1985 30th Anniversary Edition Ford Thunderbird.

"Ooohhh!" Elizaveta squealed. "Thank you, Papa! Thank you!"

"Remember, you need your license before you can drive alone!" he reminded her as she hugged him tightly.

"May I drive it now? Mike can go with me! Just once around the neighborhood! Please?!"

Viktor looked to me, and I shrugged. This was currently HIS problem, not mine. I had five more weeks before it became MY problem!

"OK," he replied. "Once. Then come back to the party!"

"Thank you!" she gushed.

I shook hands with Zach, as did Viktor, and Zach got into the passenger seat of the dealership's courtesy car. They backed out of the driveway, and Elizaveta and I got into her brand-new car.

"Take your time to check the controls," I said. "Make sure you test the turn signal, the headlights, and the wipers."

"It's broad daylight, and there are no clouds!" she protested.

"And if a bird poops on your windshield right in front of your face?"

"I'll find it and KILL it!" she growled.

"Yes, but you'll need to run the wipers to be able to see!"

"Fine," she sighed.

We fastened our seat belts, she made sure the parking brake was set, and then started the engine. The 5.0 litre V-8 roared to life, and after she tested the turn signals, wipers, and headlights, she released the parking brake, moved the gear selector to 'R', and backed out of the driveway. When she was in the street, she shifted to 'D' and pushed the gas pedal most of the way to the floor. The car leapt forward, and I laughed.

"Slow down, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I said gently. ("Kitten")

"I just wanted to test the engine!" she declared, slowing to the speed limit.

"The last thing you need is a ticket on your birthday! Or any other day!"

"I suppose. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great car! I'd prefer a manual transmission, but there's nothing wrong with the acceleration!"

She made one circuit around the neighborhood, and as we neared the house, I could tell she wasn't ready to pull into the driveway.

"You promised your dad only once," I said.

"YOU are my husband!"

"Not yet!" I said. "Once we have the 'Dance of Isaiah', THEN it's up to me! Do what you promised your dad, please."

I got THAT look again, but she pulled into the driveway and parked the Thunderbird next to my Mustang. We unbuckled our seat belts, got out of the car, and went back into the house where dessert was waiting -- two wonderful-smelling pies and ice cream served with coffee and brandy. I accepted a piece of each pie -- one cherry and one apple -- and two scoops of ice cream, as well as a splash of brandy for a toast.

By the time we left for church, I was stuffed and couldn't have eaten another bite. The pies had been followed a bit later by pastries and candy, and I thought I might need an insulin shot to counteract all the sugar. I made a mental note to jog half my usual distance before bed tonight and then make my normal run in the morning before church.

"Can we take my car?" Elizaveta asked expectantly.

"If it's OK with your dad, then yes, you can take your car to church and show it off!"

She stuck her tongue out at me and asked her dad, who agreed, so we went out to the driveway. I got my cassock from my Mustang, and we got into Elizaveta's Thunderbird for the drive to church.

"Why are you teasing me so much?" she asked as she backed out of the driveway.

"Because I love you!" I replied with a silly grin.

"Hah! If you loved me, you wouldn't tease me!"

"Not true! Do your brothers love you?"

"Yes," she replied grudgingly.

"And did they tease you?"

"You're not my brothers!"

"True, but I was making the point. Your dad teases you, too! And you've heard Clarissa, Jocelyn, and Tasha tease me as well!"

"Tasha doesn't when Nik is around. He's a stick in the mud!"

"He's loosened up a bit," I replied. "He didn't get upset about the girls teasing you about our wedding night last night. Trust me, Tasha will whip him into shape!"

"He just seems like he would be boring."

"Isn't that something for Tasha to worry about?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

"If she's happy, that's all that matters. Have you talked to her about her goals and what she wanted?"

"Not really, no."

"It might not be a bad idea for you to do that. You'll understand her much better."

"You know?" Elizaveta asked.

"Yes, because we talked about it a lot. That's why I'm marrying you and not her!"

"And Lara?"

"Was not prepared to be a deacon's wife. We certainly explored the possibility, but in the end, she, like Tasha, couldn't walk down this path with me. You can."

"Angie could have," she said quietly.

"Nobody can say what Angie might or might not have been able to do because nobody knows the *real* Angie. She started manifesting symptoms of her illness in High School before I even met her. I had no idea about her condition until long after I met her. Even if we assume she could be fully cured, there is no way to know what that Angie will be like. And, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*), I love you and nothing is going to change that. Not now; not ever." ("Kitten")

She smiled, "Do you know how good it made me feel to hear you say that?"

"Not as good as me singing to you!" I teased.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You KNEW what that would do to me! And you did it on purpose!"

"I simply did what my professor and music teacher instructed me to do," I said piously.

"Just wait, husband! I will wipe that smirk right off your face!"

Which was something I was VERY much looking forward to! May 26th simply couldn't arrive quickly enough.



April 21, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Do you have some time for me?" Jocelyn asked when I arrived at the dorm after spending the afternoon at Tasha's with Elizaveta, Mark, Alyssa, Nik, and Tasha.

"Sure. I don't have much homework or studying to do, just reading for my literature class."

"How about a walk?" she asked.

"OK."

We left the dorm and started our walk along the path that led to the football field.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Would you like to hear an interesting theory about Jos and Mik?"

"I suppose."

"I've been talking to Gene about us, and he drew an analogy that really made a lot of sense."

"You're talking to Gene about us?"

"I think he needs to understand everything that happened, including my suicide attempt."

"It's that serious?" I asked.

"It could be," she replied. "We get along great, and he likes you and Clarissa. That said, if he tells me one more time how cute Elizaveta is, HE is going to need orthopedic surgery!"

"She is," I agreed. "But you also know I always thought you were beautiful, and I still do."

Jocelyn smiled, "Thanks. I like him a lot, and you certainly like him, and I know you'd say something if you felt there was a problem."

"Just as you would to me. Tell me about the analogy."

"You know he's a physics major, but he also took a lot of shop classes. When I explained what had happened with you and me, you know, starting in kindergarten, he drew an analogy with metal. Basically, you need to temper it to strengthen it. If you don't do that, it's very hard and brittle. If you temper it, it becomes tougher and more ductile. You and I became 'Jos and Mik' in kindergarten, and save a very, very short time in second grade, never suffered a moment of adversity. There was no proper application of sufficient heat to temper the metal of our relationship.

"When serious heat finally came, it was too hot to handle, so to speak -- sex, the accident, the hysterectomy, and my lie. The relationship shattered because it was brittle. I think Gene is onto something there -- we had no adversity, and then suddenly, we had a truckload of it all at once, and the bond shattered like brittle metal. If we'd had ANY trouble, any adversity, maybe, just maybe, we'd have made it through."

I thought about what she said for a minute, then nodded, "I agree he's onto something. Our first fight, if you will, was after the accident. Forget second grade

because whatever the spat was about, it was so unimportant that nobody remembers!"

"I'm curious, and please don't take this the wrong way, but have you and Elizaveta had any disagreements?"

"You mean besides my 'inappropriate behavior'?"

"How much does she know?"

"Enough to upset her," I replied. "But we worked through it to the point where she could ask me, without sounding like a bitch, if I'd used my singing to get a girl into bed. I admitted I had, she voiced her displeasure, then promised never to raise the issue again. She knows about you and Tasha, but beyond that, she only knows I have 'extensive' experience."

"Not about Clarissa?"

"No. That idea has never even entered Elizaveta's mind, and despite wanting to be completely candid and honest, I can't reveal that specific confidence."

"You don't have to answer the question, but how many?"

"Elizaveta will be one shy of two dozen only because she got to me before graduation!"

Jocelyn laughed, "Would you really have done that? Slept with your professor?"

"She wouldn't BE my professor at that point, and the truthful answer is that I don't know for sure, but I was certainly considering it."

"Unreal," Jocelyn said, shaking her head. "You beat Dale, didn't you?"

"A competition I had no business being involved in, let alone winning," I replied.

"Can I ask another 'Jos' question?"

"Sure."

"Best sex?"

I chuckled, "You, of course."

"Oh, bullshit!" Jocelyn laughed. "It was Tasha, I'm sure of it! The object of your teenage lust!"

"No comment!"

Jocelyn laughed again, "Most people would think the very religious, very conservative clergyman's daughter would be boring in bed. I bet exactly the opposite!"

"No comment," I replied with a smirk.

"Oh, please! You've made comments about it to me and Clarissa!"

"If I tell you something, will you accept it as the honest truth?"

"From you? Yes."

"It WAS you, Jos. You were my first, and it was special because it was the first time, but even more special because it was YOU."

"I'm going to say something totally out of line."

"Compared to the series of 'out of line' things that have just been said?"

"Good point. Nobody will ever be like you, no matter what. It was that special. I just wish we'd been able to overcome our insecurities at fourteen. And had some real disagreements. Things might have turned out quite differently."

"Matushka Jocelyn?" I asked gently.

"That would have been a small hurdle for a greater prize," she replied. "'Paris is worth a mass', as it were, And yes, I'd have embraced that with my whole heart."

I wasn't so sure about that, based on everything, but I understood the sentiment behind it, and it was completely sincere.

"So, Gene?" I asked.

"He makes me feel special."

"I bet," I chuckled.

"Not just that, you idiot!" she said, laughing. "But yes, he's gentle when I need him to be and not when I don't need him to be!"

"Too much information!" I protested with a silly grin.

"Deal with it!" Jocelyn exclaimed. "But besides that, he has the relationship balance down perfectly -- he gives me my space, but he's there when I need him."

"I'm very happy for you, Jos. So what's next?"

"He has three years of undergrad work and two of graduate work. I have one more year of undergrad then three years of law school. We have lots of time."

"You know, I never asked, what does he want to do?"

"He's not sure yet. He's still taking the core courses. Probably astrophysics, but he's interested in nuclear, so he might end up going that route."

"Research?"

"Nah, building bombs for terrorists!" Jocelyn teased.

"You do realize the only thing that prevents you, me, and Gene from building a makeshift nuke is the fissionable material, right? The basic bomb design for a Hiroshima bomb was in our High School physics book -- you fire a ring of uranium at a slug of uranium. Even if it doesn't go 'boom', it's extremely radioactive, and you scare people, which is what terrorism is all about."

"You loved Mr. Black, didn't you?"

"I did. And I actually went to the library and read a little bit about the Manhattan Project after he told us about it."

"You do realize that was his plan, right?"

"It was pretty obvious, but I learned more from him than any other teacher at Harding County High."

"Same here. Thanks for talking to me, Mik."

"Anytime, Jos."

She turned and held out her arms for a hug which I gladly gave her, and then we returned to the dorm to join the study group.

LX. Day and Night

April 25, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

I was startled awake by my phone ringing sometime after going to bed on Wednesday night. I carefully got out of bed, glancing at the alarm clock, which showed 1:47am, moved across the room, and answered the phone.

"Mike," I said.

"Mike?" a whispered voice came through the handset. "It's Angie."

The time and the whispering made it clear she was making the call without her parents' knowledge.

"Angie? It's almost 2:00am."

"I know," she replied. "But they won't let me talk to you!"

"You mean your parents?"

"And the doctors! I don't have anyone to talk to who understands me and cares the way you do!"

"Have you talked with Father Stephen?" I asked.

"He sides with my doctors! And all they do is give me drugs! I don't need the drugs, Mike! I'm fine!"

She actually DID sound fine, minus the whispering. But I'd known her for nearly four years, and when her medication was right and there was no stress, she *seemed* normal. But she'd had three incidents, each one worse than the previous one, and each one related to me in some way.

"I don't know what I can do, Ang," I said gently.

"Talk to Doctor Mercer and Doctor Hoffman! Tell them I'm OK! Please?!"

I actually COULD talk to them, though telling them Angie was 'OK' wasn't something I could honestly do because I had no idea how Angie was. But I could talk to them, and it would be a way to defuse what could potentially be another major breakdown, one from which she might not recover. That said, there were serious limits to what I could do.

"I'll call them today," I replied gently. "I promise to do that if you promise to go back to bed and follow your parents' rules."

"OK," she whispered reluctantly.

"I promise I'll call, Ang. I mean that. Now, go back to bed, please."

"Thank you," she whispered, and I heard the click as she hung up.

I replaced the handset in the cradle and went back to bed. I tried, but couldn't sleep because I kept thinking about Angie, so after about twenty minutes, I got up, made some tea, then picked up *Doctor Zhivago*, the penultimate book we were reading for Doctor Blahnik's class. I read until dawn, said my morning prayers, then went out for a run, during which I mulled over the situation with Angie.

One thing I was sure of, and that was that if the doctors were convinced that the drugs were keeping Angie on an even keel, they weren't going to stop prescribing them. Twice, as far as I was aware, they had weaned her from the antipsychotics, but the antidepressants hadn't been able to keep her from having what I called a 'meltdown' over something to do with me.

The problem was that my research had revealed that the biggest problem with mental healthcare was overmedication. I read two articles about using diet and exercise, and ensuring sufficient sleep, as well as church attendance, helping in mild cases, but those studies had been challenged, in some cases vehemently, by those who felt that medication was the best solution. But then, I'd read a study of how patients who had been committed were treated, and I was appalled.

As Doctor Johnson had implied, what I was finding was that the provision of mental healthcare was poorly supported, poorly understood, poorly funded, and over-reliant on pharmaceuticals. In effect, patients who were suffering from anything beyond mild illness were drugged into compliance, and no REAL help was given. The ones with mild illness were often drugged as well, but not to the same degree. And those researchers and therapists who objected to medication were being shouted down. One article suggested that the major pharmaceutical companies were behind that push, and that article had resonated with me.

But where did that leave me with Angie? Was there anything I could do to help her? I was in no position to assume any responsibility for her care, even setting aside my marriage, which was but a month away. I had neither the resources nor the time it would take to provide the kind of care she needed. Even doing the nearly unthinkable -- giving up on medical school and breaking things off with Elizaveta -- wouldn't solve the problem because I was basically only qualified for entry-level jobs, and even those options were limited because I would only have an undergraduate degree in biochemistry.

I knew that Mrs. Stephens did not work so she could be there for Angie at any time, and that was only possible because of a combination of Mr. Stephens having a good job and the disability payments Angie had received from Social Security when she was completely unable to work. Even then, it was a stretch, and I knew it put significant strain on the family -- emotionally, physically, mentally, and financially.

So what *could* I do? Make the phone calls, of course, at least to start. And have a talk with Father Stephen as well. Beyond that, I didn't know what I could do. Even if Angie lived closer, I would have to take into account my responsibilities to Elizaveta and ensure whatever help I provided didn't interfere with our marriage. And there was no *real* question about that decision -- I wanted to marry Elizaveta, for all the practical reasons she'd given and I'd thought about, but also because I was in love with her.

My talk with Jocelyn on Sunday night had triggered a series of images and thoughts and helped me understand exactly why and how we had blown our relationship to bits. The most important lesson I felt I could take away from that conversation and the contemplation of what had happened was that I had to be open and honest with Elizaveta about everything, lest some tiny issue fester and eventually wreck our relationship. In hindsight, which was often 20/20, I understood that Jocelyn and I had never addressed the issue that had wrecked 'Jos and Mik' -- our true feelings for each other at age fourteen.

For me, it was part of the main issue which Liz had identified -- I, like my dad, had avoided confrontation at every turn, save sparring in karate. It had taken Jocelyn's accident, her betrayal of trust, my immature response to that betrayal, and a terrible year apart, along with everything that had happened with Liz, to teach me that my dad's solution was the wrong one, on just about every count. In some ways, running away was worse than violent confrontation. In the end, I was sure the solution was found in the middle.

When I finished my run, I scribbled down some thoughts onto a piece of loose-leaf paper, then took a shower and dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. It was plenty warm, and I had no classes on Thursday, so being completely casual was an option. I checked my watch, and I noted I had about thirty minutes before breakfast, so I made another pot of tea and sat down once again with *Doctor Zhivago*.

When Clarissa, Sophia, Robby, and Lee showed up at my door thirty-five minutes later, I asked Clarissa to step in for a moment.

"Angie called just before 2:00am," I said.

"Uh-oh," Clarissa replied.

"I know. Anyway, she asked me to talk to her doctors about the medication. You know what I've found in my research, right?"

"Yeah," Clarissa sighed. "Nothing good. What are you going to do?"

"After breakfast, I'll call Doctor Hoffman, Doctor Mercer, and Father Stephen and hear what they have to say. I'm pretty sure I know what the doctors will say. My fear is that they give Angie grief over calling me, and that creates a problem all by itself."

"She asked you to call them, so it's not like she expects you not to tell them."

"I agree, but I need to convince them to let it go and focus on the real issue."

"How did she sound?"

"Like Angie when she was functioning. But I'm positive she's on antidepressants and at least some amount of antipsychotics. And every time they've weaned her

completely from those, some interaction with me has caused a meltdown, and they've increased in severity each time."

"Blaming yourself again?"

I shook my head, "No. I'm simply acknowledging the facts. Her symptoms really began in High School, and nobody realized, which I totally get because teenagers aren't exactly mentally or emotionally stable to begin with!"

"With YOU being the prime example!"

"I won't argue with you, Lissa. Anyway, we shouldn't keep the trio waiting. Let's go have breakfast, and we can talk more afterwards."

Clarissa agreed, so we left my room, and I locked the door behind us.

"Everything OK?" Robby asked.

"Angie called last night."

"Uh-oh," he replied.

"Exactly what I said," Clarissa declared.

"Let's have breakfast and worry about any ramifications after I talk to the doctors."

They agreed, and we moved to the elevator and rode down to the lobby. When we arrived at the cafeteria, a few of our friends were already sitting at our usual table.

"Mike," José asked when we sat down, "did you hear two guys dropped out as RAs for the Fall?"

"No. When did that happen?"

"On Tuesday. One of them was Gary, the guy from the 2nd floor, who was going to be our RA. I was thinking about applying."

"You'd be great! And that would help continue the Rickenbacker 8 tradition!"

"For sure!" Robby agreed. "The last thing we want is an RA who isn't totally cool like Mike has been."

"How about somebody cooler?" José asked with a smirk.

"That's a pretty low bar," Clarissa teased.

"Love you, too, Lissa," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Don't they have alternates?" Lee asked.

"Supposedly, they had only exactly the right number of qualified applicants," José replied.

"How'd you hear about it?" Jocelyn asked.

"You know Dona's campus job this year is in the admissions office, right? She heard it there. They're going to post flyers today. I'm going to go put in my application at 9:00am."

"You'll have my support for sure!" I replied. "Are they going to do a new survey?"

"I have no idea. Melody wasn't sure either because this really does amount to an emergency because they need to find two people before August, and school is out in just over four weeks."

"You know, I didn't even check, but who is the RA on the female side of the floor?"

"Karen, from the 5th floor," Dona said. "She's OK. I'm pretty sure Dean Anderson hand-selected her the way she did Gary before he dropped out."

"Why did he drop out?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Does it matter?"

"No. It's not really important."

We finished breakfast and headed back to the dorm. Clarissa came to my room with me at my request.

"I think I'm going to call Father Stephen first," I said.

"Because of the article you read, which said that religious people had better outcomes, on average?"

"Yes. I'm curious how often she was in church during Holy Week and if Father Stephen saw any improvement in her mental state."

Clarissa nodded, "Makes sense. Should I leave?"

"Probably. I'll come find you, OK?"

"Of course!"

She hugged me, then left, closing the door behind her. I picked up the handset and dialed the office at Saint George in Loveland. The woman who answered the phone put me right through once I identified myself.

"Good morning, Subdeacon. Christ is risen!"

"Truly He is risen!"

"How can I help you?"

"Father, this might sound like an off-the-wall question, but how often was Angie in church during Holy Week?"

"She hasn't missed a single service since she came home from the hospital."

"And how would you say her demeanor was?"

"At first, the drugs had a big impact, but as they've reduced her dosage, she was serene and calm. Why are you asking?"

"I read a research article which indicated that people with conditions similar to the one from which Angie suffers have statistically significant better outcomes if they are religious. May I share something in complete confidence with you?"

"As long as you aren't trying to hide something from Father Nicholas, yes, of course."

"I'm not, and I'll speak to him about this. Angie called me very early this morning, just before 2:00am. It was obvious from the time and the fact that she

was whispering that she was doing something of which her doctors wouldn't have approved."

"No, they wouldn't. She's asked to see you, but her psychiatrist thinks that's a very bad idea."

"And what do you think?"

"That I can't second guess professional medical opinions. I think, in the right context, it would be OK spiritually for you to see her, but I have to defer to her doctor."

"Do you know if the medical team is in agreement?"

"I'm not privy to their internal debates, so I honestly have no idea. What are you thinking, Subdeacon?"

"She asked me to talk to them about the drugs. As part of the research my professor has me doing for my abnormal psych class into the provision of mental healthcare, I've discovered just how messed up it is, once you get beyond the kind of general life counseling I've had with Doctor Mercer, or other things which can be effectively treated just by talking them through and making minor changes in your behavior.

"Once drugs are involved, it's a complete and utter mess, as is institutionalization, which only exacerbates the issue with overuse of pharmaceuticals. Besides that study about religious people, there are also studies which show that mild symptoms can be controlled by, and more serious symptoms somewhat attenuated by, proper diet, exercise, and sleep. Angie used to run and go to karate. Do you know if she's doing those things now?"

"She's not, and she wasn't before her most recent incident."

"And that makes me wonder if a combination of diet, exercise, sleep, church, and staying away from me might mean she could go back to just the antidepressants. I know she was on antipsychotics, sedatives, and antidepressants when she went home."

"They took her off the sedatives just before Holy Week," Father Stephen said. "And I know they've reduced the antipsychotics, but it's obvious they're impacting her because she's still a bit slow when talking about complex issues, and she still has some difficulty reading anything beyond about a fifth-grade level."

"That's how she was one of the times I saw her in the past."

"May I ask how you plan to keep her away from you when you're the one person on the planet she feels is truly on her side?"

"That's a problem for a different day," I replied. "But I think I know my next step."

"Which is?"

"To talk to Doctor Mercer and see if she's willing to go to bat for Angie with regard to the drugs. The last time I spoke with Doctor Hoffman, one of the psychiatrists, they were thinking that Angie would need antipsychotics on a permanent basis. That's what Angie wants to stop, I'm sure. The antidepressants didn't bother her, really, because the dosage was low enough that there really weren't any major side effects. I'm sure they increased that dosage as well."

"Be careful, Michael. You aren't a medical doctor. At least not yet."

"I understand. And that's why I decided to only call Doctor Mercer. She and I can discuss it, and if she thinks it's reasonable, then she can present it to her colleagues. Talking with you made me decide that trying to have this conversation with an MD wouldn't be appropriate. I have something of a collegial relationship with Doctor Mercer, though obviously not a full one because of my status."

"Then I'll let you go so you can place that call. Please let me know the outcome, and I'll see you on the 26th for your wedding."

"Thanks, Father. See you then."

We said 'goodbye', and I pressed the switchhook so I could place the next call. As I'd expected, Doctor Mercer was with a patient, and her receptionist promised she would call back in about thirty minutes. I thanked her, hung up, then went to find Clarissa. She came back to my room with me, and I put on *Around the World in a Day* by Prince and the Revolution.

"I think that's the right approach," Clarissa said after I'd given her the rough outline of the conversation. "My concern is the same as Father Stephen's -- how do you deal with the fact that you're basically the only person she trusts, but you're also the trigger for her breakdowns?"

"That is exactly the question I have to ask Doctor Mercer. It's a serious conundrum because even if I were to set everything and everyone else aside, I couldn't be what she needs, and the State of Ohio says I can't be what she says she wants."

"You're not actually considering something like that, are you?"

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "Well, that's not quite true. I'm considering it, but only in the sense of trying to understand the impossible situation from

Angie's perspective. The best I can do at this point is support her, and even that is difficult. It's not from lack of desire or will but from what amounts to simple helplessness. What really scares me is that at some point, in the ER, I'll be helpless to save someone. You know it will happen."

"Which is why we need to be there for each other," Clarissa replied. "You know I'll probably have the same situation; I suspect every doctor eventually does."

"True."

We sat quietly with the music playing, waiting for Doctor Mercer to return my call, which she did just before the 'A' side of the album finished. When I answered the phone, Clarissa left the room so I would have some privacy.

"Hi, Mike. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Angie. She called me just before 2:00am this morning and implored me to speak to her doctors about getting her off the medication."

Doctor Mercer sighed, "I'd hoped to prevent that."

"Not to be an ass about it, but seriously? I mean, short of locking her up, nothing could prevent her from eventually finding three minutes when she could make a phone call."

"You're right, of course. Tell me exactly what she said, if you would."

"She said that the doctors wouldn't let her speak with me and that she doesn't have anyone else who understands her and cares the way I do. I asked her about Father Stephen, and she said he sides with the doctors, and all they do is give her drugs. She begged me to talk to you and Doctor Hoffman and to tell you that

she's OK. I promised to call if she promised to go back to bed and follow her parents' rules. She said she would. This morning, I called Father Stephen and had a talk with him, and now I'm calling you. I didn't feel it proper to speak to Doctor Hoffman because of what I wanted to say."

"Are you able to share what you spoke to Father Stephen about?"

"I asked about Angie going to church and how he felt she was doing. I also discussed with him some academic papers I read while researching my final paper for abnormal psych."

"What's the topic?"

"In my words? The lousy way we provide healthcare to the mentally ill, and the overuse of pharmaceuticals. I didn't pick it, by the way; it was assigned by my professor after I turned in my paper on schizophrenia."

"I'm going to hazard a guess that your experience with Angie informed your paper, and it was obvious to your professor you knew someone who was suffering from mental illness?"

"Exactly. She wanted to make sure I was getting the help I needed to deal with it."

"She sounds like a good professor. Before we talk about Angie, would you tell me what you learned from your research?"

I explained my research, and the papers which had indicated better results for religious people as well as the effects of diet, exercise, and nutrition.

"But," I said in conclusion, "I'm not a medical doctor, and so I don't feel right trying to discuss this with Doctor Hoffman because it would feel too much like

trying to counter her diagnosis and treatment plan, and I'm not really qualified to do that."

"That's an interesting dilemma -- when you start your third year in medical school, you'll be seeing patients and doing minor procedures under very careful supervision. At that point, do you think you're qualified to give your input? And are you qualified to question your supervisor's diagnosis and treatment plan?"

"I know the answer to that, and it's that I'm supposed to do it, even if I'm not necessarily qualified, because it's part of my training. In this case, though, I haven't even graduated from college; more importantly, I'm certainly not one of Doctor Hoffman's students."

"There is another take, and that is that medical care decisions should involve loved ones when the person themselves can't make their own decisions or need help making decisions."

"If the loved one isn't the source of a potential meltdown," I replied.

"That is our major dilemma, which I'm sure you realize. Did Father Stephen tell you she's been asking to see you?"

"Yes. And I assume she's been asking her mom if she could call me."

"She has."

"I feel like we're going around in circles here, and I'm wondering if you would examine the research and maybe discuss taking Angie completely off the antipsychotics and reducing or eliminating the antidepressants."

"You know the risks associated with doing that."

"And the current situation is any better? If she goes to church, runs, practices karate, and eats right, maybe she'll be as stable as she was when she was here."

"Until she works herself into another incident because she can't be with you."

"Which she's not going to give up on because she thinks I'm the only one on her side. But I don't get that because she knows I'm going to marry Elizaveta in a month."

"I'm going to share something with you because I think you need to know. Angie believes that if we let her go to bed with you, you'll abandon Elizaveta and marry her."

"Knowing myself as I do, Angie is probably right, but that is simply not going to happen," I said firmly. "I'm in love with Elizaveta, and I'm not about to break off my engagement with less than a month to go."

"When did that happen?"

"I realized last weekend that I'd fallen deeply in love with her. I love her the other way, too, you know, «agápē», of course, but falling in love with her so hard surprised me."

"I'd say that's a good thing."

"Me, too. And you know I rebuffed Angie's attempts to get me to take her to bed after the first incident. And if you recall, I offered a path to that, but she was insistent that the only way forward was sleeping together."

"Mike, I hear you, and if you give me the references to those articles, I'll read them, but I think you're engaging in a bit of wishful thinking."

I sighed deeply, "Sadly, you're probably right."

"You've seen this three times now, Mike -- she's apparently healthy and normal, and then there's an incident of some sort that drives her into a state where drugs are required to stabilize her. I think you can guess when the next break is coming."

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"Sometime not long after I marry, and what she sees as her 'escape route', if you will, vanishes. And I'm no longer the one person who understands or cares, leaving her with nobody, at least from her perspective."

"That's a reasonable analysis."

"Shit," I sighed.

"Gave up on the Russian?"

"Mostly, as we discussed, except for Elizaveta's pet name and church words. So what should I do?"

"Let me take it from here. If you have the names of the journals where you read those scholarly articles, you can give them to me."

"One sec."

I retrieved my research folder and read off the names of the journals, the authors, and the titles of the articles.

"I do have one request," I said.

"What's that?"

"No recriminations or repercussions from her calling me. Just let that go, except for acknowledging that she called me."

"That I can do."

"And when she calls again?"

"Tell her the truth -- you spoke to me, and I promised to review the materials. Don't go beyond that because we don't know that those one-off studies are repeatable, and we don't know that they'll help her."

"OK."

"Would you share your two papers with me when the semester is over?"

"Of course. I'll drop them in the mail to you once my final paper is graded."

"Everything else is good?"

"Yes. We're both counting down the days!"

"I bet!" Doctor Mercer said with a soft laugh.

"Not just for that!" I chuckled. "But yes."

"I'll see you at your wedding. If Angie does contact you, please call and let me know. I'll talk to her about it; I won't make an issue of it, though."

"Thanks, Doctor Mercer. See you in four weeks."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, feeling there had to be more I could do, but if there was, I had no idea what it might be.



April 26, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday, Elizaveta picked me up for the first time, as she'd passed her driving test Thursday afternoon after school. When I got into the car, she had a huge smile on her face.

"You look happy!" I observed.

"I'll be happier one month from today!" she declared.

We exchanged a soft kiss, and after I buckled my seat belt, she pulled out of the parking lot, heading for Frisch's.

"How was school today?" I asked.

"You always ask, and it's always the same! How was your day?"

"Typical, really. Yesterday was a bit different because Angie called me to ask me to intercede on her behalf to get the doctors to take her off the medication. I talked to Father Stephen, then called Doctor Mercer and left it in their hands."

"Is she having another, uhm, incident?"

"No, but everyone thinks she'll have a major one at the end of the month."

"Because we're getting married?"

"Yes. But there really isn't anything that can be done about it."

"But you love her," Elizaveta said apprehensively.

"I love YOU, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*), truly and deeply. From the day you first approached me and I agreed to marry you, I was determined to love you. But then I *fell* in love with you. You are the one I love, and you are the one I want to marry. That is the absolute truth, and nothing is going to stand in the way of us becoming husband and wife." ("Kitten/green")

"I knew weeks ago," she said with a soft smile. "I was just hoping you would tell me before the wedding without me having to ask."

"Sometimes I'm a bit dense and slow on the uptake."

"Boys tend to be that way! That's why girls should be in charge!"

"You and every other Russian woman I know agree. And in response, all of us men turn into our grandfathers out of self-defense!"

"I thought you agreed with Mr. Sokolov that God gave men wives to make them better men!"

"I do! My grandfather IS a better man!" I teased.

"Hah!"

"What are we doing after dinner with Clarissa, Abby, Jocelyn, and Gene?" I asked.

"There's nothing at the theatres that I want to see that isn't rated 'R', so movies are out. The mini golf place isn't open until next week, so that leaves bowling or roller skating unless you have another idea."

"No. I checked, and the local theatre company doesn't have a show, and there are no concerts or shows at the university or any place I could take you. And between bowling and roller skating, I'd pick bowling."

"We could go to your room at Doctor Blahnik's house..." she said breathlessly.

"You have NO idea how tempting that is," I replied carefully, "but to fall before we cross the finish line..."

"I know," she said with a deep sigh. "I just want to be with you!"

"And I want to be with you," I replied, the image of what she might look like naked forming in my head, threatening to cause severe discomfort given I was wearing blue jeans.

"We could just kiss and stuff," she suggested.

"And stuff?" I asked with a silly smile and an arched eyebrow, though I wasn't sure she could see, given she was paying attention to the road.

She giggled, "Stuff!"

"I think that would be playing with fire," I replied, struggling against the desire that had been building like an avalanche for the past week.

"You think I'm hot?" she asked with a smirk.

"VERY!" I replied emphatically.

"So after dinner..."

"«КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I said gently. "I promise to make love to you day and night once we're married. Four weeks from the day after tomorrow." ("Kitten")

"We should have married THIS weekend!" she lamented.

At that moment, there was no way I could disagree with her because the anticipation was starting to interfere with my thoughts at very inconvenient times. I needed some way to refocus, but without stifling the desire too much.

"If we did, I might have flunked out of school!"

She laughed with me, and fortunately, we arrived at Frisch's, which put an end to that part of our conversation. Of course, I was sure it would begin again in earnest as soon as we were alone. There was no doubt in my mind that the next month was going to be VERY challenging.



April 27, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"So, what do I do?" Mark asked when he and Alyssa arrived at church on Saturday evening.

"Come with me, and I'll explain everything as we're doing it. Vespers is pretty easy."

He followed me to the front of the nave, and I stopped at the south, or right-hand, Deacon's Door.

"You always enter by the south door," I said. "And only when you have a specific reason to be in the altar. When you enter, normally, you would do a kneeling prostration and kiss the floor, but we don't do that during the time between Pascha and Ascension. You'll see the priests and deacons kneel before the altar table and kiss it, but again, during this time, they simply bow and kiss the table.

"Once we're inside, speak only when absolutely necessary. If a conversation is needed beyond a simple instruction or answering a question from Father, you go through the door to the vestry. There is a door from the vestry to the sidewalk outside, but we only use that in case of emergency or when we're cleaning the altar. So, just follow my lead now."

We went through the Deacon's Door, and I performed a simple *metania*, touching my hand to the floor, then watched as Mark did the same. Once he straightened, I beckoned him to follow me into the vestry.

"The first thing you do is put on one of the cassocks," I said, taking a cassock from a hanger. "I think this one is the right size. There are a few of each size, so there should be no trouble. You don't need a blessing to put it on, but you will need one to put on your actual vestments."

"Is it OK to take off my dress shirt?" he asked.

"Yes. Once I had my own cassock which I could put on before coming into the church, I started wearing black T-shirts in the Summer and short-sleeved black shirts in the Winter. That made it much more comfortable."

"Do deacons wear their cassocks full-time the way priests do?"

"The bishop prefers that they do but makes allowances for work. He strongly prefers they wear ties at all times unless their job requires a specific uniform.

Doctors wear ties all the time with their lab coats, so that's not an issue, and obviously, I'd wear surgical scrubs when I'm working in the ER."

"How do I know what color vestments to wear?"

"Look at the cloths on the icon stands and the altar and match them," I replied. "If they are gold or purple, that's obvious. If they are any other color, wear gold. Over time, you'll just know because the calendar is the same, year in and year out, minus the specific dates of the movable feasts. Anyway, what you do is get properly sized vestments," I said, taking down one of the larger gold *sticharia* and handing it to him, "and then fold them such that the cross on the back is centered. Then take them to Father Nicholas for a blessing, kiss his hand, and then put them on."

"Do deacons do that as well?"

"Yes. And priests when the bishop is here. In fact, when the bishop is here for my wedding, all of us will take our vestments to him for his blessing. Remember, as we discussed, the priest is here representing the bishop whose *antimens* is on the altar table. It's folded now and wrapped in a red cloth called an *ilitón*, and is under the Gospel book. Tomorrow morning, you'll see it unfolded. It is very similar to the *Epitaphion*, but has other icons, and it also has the bishop's signature on it. If you remember, we discussed in catechism that the *antimens* authorizes Father Nicholas to celebrate the Holy Mysteries in the bishop's absence."

Father Nicholas came into the vestry, and after greeting us, he blessed both of our vestments, and we put them on.

"Tonight, you'll stand next to me," I said to Mark. "Nathan and Elias are serving and will be here momentarily. I'd like you to carry the processional cross. It's really simple, as there is just one Entrance. You follow the two torch-bearers out

the north door and bow as they do in front of the iconostasis, then stand on the south, or right side, while Father Nicholas says the prayers of the Entrance. When you come back in, come in through the south door, return the cross to its stand, then come stand next to me. Just observe what I do because once I'm ordained in the Fall, it will be up to the acolytes to prepare the censer and hand it to me or to Father, depending on the circumstances."

"I've never seen a service with a deacon. Is it different?"

"Very much so. In fact, you'll see that Father Nicholas does quite a bit less during the services. In the normal case, a subdeacon would not sing the little litanies as I do, but the bishop gave his blessing for me to do that because of his intention to ordain me to the diaconate. Those really are the only things that I could do before ordination, and that bit of «ekonomia» helped save Father's voice. Holy Week was pretty rough."

"Is it OK to use a service book in the altar?"

"Sure. Just put it on the shelf near where you're standing when it's time to make the Entrance. Let's go back to the altar. Just stand quietly and pray or meditate, and I'll let you know when you need to do something."

"OK."

We went back into the altar, and I prepared the censer and lit the oil lamps on the altar, then took my place on the south side of the altar, near the iconostasis, and waited for the service to begin. Things went smoothly, and Mark did a good job. When the Vespers service ended, we received Father's blessing to remove our vestments, then left the altar and found Elizaveta and Alyssa waiting in the nave.

"What about tomorrow morning?" Mark asked.

"Just arrive about fifteen minutes before Matins begins, and I'll go over everything with you. You'll carry the processional cross again. I just remembered there is a copy of the service book in which Deacon Grigory made copious notes for acolytes. Let me get that for you, and you can review it. Just bring it back with you in the morning."

I went back to the altar, retrieved the book, and brought it to Mark. He thanked me, and then he and Alyssa left. Elizaveta and I went out to her car so she could drive me back to campus.

"They have to be our first dinner guests," Elizaveta said as she pulled out of the parking lot. "I really like them."

"Same here," I replied. "It'll have to be after our trip to Europe."

"Obviously! We're going to be doing OTHER stuff!"

"And what might that be, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I asked with feigned innocence. ("Kitten")

"Making love! Day and night! You promised!"

"Yes, I did indeed!" I replied. "And I'm VERY much looking forward to it!"

LXI. Code Blue

April 28, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Sunday, after the Divine Liturgy, Father Nicholas asked me to come to his office.

"I spoke with Vladyka last evening. He gave his blessing for you to play in your band with a couple of conditions, which I don't think will be a problem. The venues are important -- no bars or clubs. He'd prefer you play things like High School dances or venues where no alcohol is served. The key is decorum."

"Thank you. I'll make sure I discuss any concerts with you in advance. You know about the one this Friday at Taft that José and I are giving, though Doctor Blahnik suggested the band sing *Piano Man* as a kind of preview of coming attractions."

"That's in the main auditorium at the university, right?"

"Yes. You're more than welcome to attend. I'll leave your name so you don't have to pay the admission."

"Do you make money from playing?"

"No. That covers the use of the hall, and that's it. José and I do it because we enjoy it. We'll probably make a bit of money from concerts as a band. The only time I've ever earned any money is a small amount for the concerts during orientation."

"Changing subjects, Mark did very well last night and this morning. You're a good instructor, and I appreciate that, but we'll need to decide on a senior acolyte once you take on your duties as a deacon."

"Elias," I replied. "He's the most senior, which would give him priority, but he's also very mature, and I believe the other young men respect him."

"I agree. I'll speak to him on Wednesday. Have you heard anything more about Angela?"

"No, and I didn't really expect to. If anything changes and I hear from Father Stephen or Doctor Mercer, I'll let you know. They'll both be here for my wedding."

"Keep praying for her, Subdeacon."

"Every day, Father."

I received his blessing and went to find Elizaveta so we could drive to Tasha's apartment. As had been the case for every time we'd been together after she got her driving license, Elizaveta drove. I hoped the 'new license syndrome' would wear off soon because I wasn't getting to drive very much at all! We parked along the street near the Quick Mart and then joined Tasha, Nik, Alyssa, and Mark for our usual Sunday afternoon gathering.

"Can I ask a question?" Mark inquired after Tasha served everyone tea or soft drinks.

"Always!" she responded.

"How do you know which canons to follow in your daily life?"

"You listen to your bishop and do as he says, often through the priest," she replied. "If you follow them strictly and literally, Mike couldn't have been friendly towards you when you first met because there is a specific canon against being friendly and associating with non-Christians, well, I suppose that would really mean non-Orthodox. That seems completely out of line in our modern situation, and the bishops have said so."

"Mark," I said gently, "don't go down the fundamentalist path. You'll hear monks advocating things such as married couples abstaining from marital relations except for the specific purpose of procreating and encouraging the faithful to refuse to associate with anyone who is not Orthodox. Those canons were, in context, about not associating with pagans in a social situation or, later on, socializing with Muslims. But you have to take into account the political and social systems of the times. As Tasha said, following those canons is nearly impossible in a multicultural society and would make it impossible to spread the Gospel. Consider how Father Nicholas handled your fasting rule as an example -- it wasn't strict. Why? Or rather, what's the purpose?"

"Spiritual growth."

"Exactly. Remember, we don't fast so that we can say we followed the rules; we fast to help us grow in our Christian walk. So those canons which prohibit playing cards, hunting, creating a work of art, or even going to an art museum are usually dealt with by «ekonomia» because of the context in which they were formed, unless there is some personal problem which makes those things an impediment to your salvation. A perfect example from the Bible is the ruling on how to deal with Gentile converts -- not requiring they be circumcised because that would be an impediment to adults coming to the Faith."

"No kidding!" Alyssa said with a smirk.

"Easy for YOU to laugh about!" Mark said, visibly shuddering at the thought.

"So, that's why some women wear scarves, and some don't?" Alyssa asked.

"Mostly, I noticed the young women, except for Oksana and Serafima, don't wear them, but the older ladies do."

"Yes," I answered. "That's something that's up to each individual, as is the way they venerate icons. You've seen some people do a full prostration, others do a *metania*, and others simply cross themselves. Do what feels right for you. I'm in the 'in-between' group, and I simply do a *metania*, but don't follow me just to follow me -- do what feels right, and if you need guidance, speak with Father Nicholas."

"How about we play *Uno*?" Tasha suggested.

Everyone agreed and we spent a couple of hours playing, and then Tasha, Elizaveta, and Alyssa made dinner. After a wonderful dinner, which included a tasty cake for dessert, I walked Elizaveta to her car, and once she'd driven off, I walked back to the dorm.

"Mike?" a voice called out just as I was opening the door to the dorm lobby.

I turned to see who it was. It was Mindy Ellison, who I rarely saw because we shared no classes, given we had different majors and she was three years behind me, plus we were in separate dorms, which had been partly my doing.

"Hi, Mindy. What's up?"

"How have you been? I haven't really seen you much."

"I'm doing well. You?"

"College is fun, and I don't have any grades less than a B."

"Cool! I take it you talk to Liz regularly?"

"Sure, but once she married, she became busy with Paul, work, and school. But I have new friends here, and I'm seeing a guy from my dorm who's a Junior. Anyway, I just wanted to say 'Hi' because I saw you, but also Liz said I should ask you about coming to the wedding."

"The church ceremony is open to everyone, but I'd have to ask my future grandmothers-in-law about the reception. You and your boyfriend?"

"Yes. I wasn't sure if you'd be OK with me being there because we..."

I smiled, "I'm OK with it so long as you're discreet."

"I'd never say anything to get you in trouble! Sure, I talked about it with my friends in High School, but nobody else."

I chuckled, "I mean this in the nicest way, but telling your friends seems to have been just one step short of putting it on the *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite!"

Mindy laughed and leaned forward, "You were THAT good! We all agree!"

"Let me see what I can do about an invitation. It's on the 26th. I know we had some people on my list from outside the area say they couldn't make it. I would have invited you if I'd known you wanted to be there."

"It's no big deal, Mike. I mean, you and I both know it was just amazing sex and nothing more. We weren't, like, close friends. Will Emmy be there?"

"She was invited, yes."

"Have you seen Maggie?"

"Just once. I ran into her at the mall a few weeks ago. She seemed OK."

"She and Mike Palmer are together. I think you two made a better couple."

"There were way too many hurdles to overcome," I said. "Are you coming to the concert on Friday?"

"I wouldn't miss it! You and your singing partner are awesome! It's too bad you guys aren't looking for groupies! I know lots of girls who are interested!"

I chuckled, "I'm engaged, and José might as well be. Dona keeps him on a very short leash, but he's happy."

"So he likes being tied up?" she smirked.

"I have no idea! And you're still bad, Mindy Ellison!"

"Bad is good, right?" she asked sexily.

"It certainly was for me! I need to get inside for study group. See you Friday evening. And I'll call Elizaveta about invitations when I get upstairs."

"Thanks, Mike!"

"You're welcome!"

She gave me a quick, chaste hug, and I turned and went into the building.



April 30, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"How did your interview go?" I asked José when he came into my room after lunch on Tuesday.

"I think it went OK. You were featured in the interview!"

"Me?"

"They used the incident with Will and Vickie and asked how I'd respond. I simply used your response as an example to guide my answer, and it seemed as if they liked what I said."

"It was a fairly straightforward response."

"I'd have decked the guy. You don't hit a woman, period. And I'm no pacifist!"

I chuckled, "You have that whole 'macho Latin' thing going, except when you're playing guitar."

"Chicks dig it," he grinned.

"But you're on a short leash at the moment!"

"I'm sure as heck not complaining! Dona's sweet, and she's sexy as hell! And there is nobody on a shorter leash than you right now!"

"Jason," I replied.

"OK, that's like bondage!" José said with a grin. "But he signed up for it, big time! I heard the story about the Jack Daniel's."

"I'd say it was a fair trade of his freedom! Fran is awesome and super nice; she just keeps him on that very, very short leash."

"Shall we go over the playlist for Friday?"

"Sure."

He handed me a handwritten song list.

"I think," he said, "that the 'coming attractions' song should be the last song of the second set before we do our encore numbers."

"I was thinking at the end of the first set," I countered, "so as not to break the flow at the end."

"Hmmm," he said, considering, "I think you might be right. I was wanting to keep everyone focused on the concert, but the fifteen-minute break between sets should do that. OK. I'll move *Piano Man* there. Anything else?"

"No," I answered. "I think the small concert here in the dorm worked really well, and we're going to have a much wider audience, and none of our friends will complain about the identical sets."

"Next question -- do you think Doctor Blahnik would put Dona and me up for the night on Sunday following the wedding?"

"I can't imagine why she wouldn't; just ask her."

"I'm glad Sunday is a move-out day; otherwise, it would be a royal pain in the butt! Dona's mom is coming to get her stuff on Saturday, then my parents are coming on Sunday to get my stuff. They'll bring two cars and leave one for me so I can give Dona a ride back to Milford."

"Sorry for the crazy logistics! Do you know what others are doing?"

"Lara rented a hotel room for her and Jack; Pete and Sandy are staying at Abby's with Clarissa; Brandon is staying at Kimiko's house in Columbus, and she's going to borrow her dad's car to drive back and forth; Robby, Lee, and Sophia are renting a hotel room; Jocelyn and Gene plan to drive to her house after the reception. I don't know about the rest, and everyone has some kind of plan to get their stuff out of their rooms by noon on Sunday."

"I wish the school would extend move-out to Monday, but Dean Anderson laughed when I suggested that in jest."

"Yeah, even though we're all on one floor, they need to get things ready for Summer and start on whatever repairs they need for the Fall. How early did you have to come back as RA?"

"There's an orientation which starts a couple of days before the student orientation if you've never been an RA," I replied. "You'll get your CPR card during that time if you don't have it."

"Dona and I both got ours last year. Nobody gave you any grief about the girls staying in here before you and Elizaveta got together, right?"

"None at all. I don't think they'll care if Dona is in here every night, so long as she pays for her room."

José laughed, "Like all government organizations, if they get their 'cut', they're happy."

I chuckled, "Did you ever see the *Star Trek* episode 'A Piece of the Action'?"

"No. Why?"

"The *Enterprise* discovers a planet that learned everything about civilization from a book called *Chicago Mobs of the Twenties*, which was allegedly published in 1992, so I suppose it could happen. But anyway, Kirk has to settle a gang war, and through a bunch of hilarity, including him trying to drive a car with a clutch, he tells them the United Federation of Planets is taking over. At the end of the episode, Spock asked Kirk how he planned to explain to Starfleet Command that a starship had to be sent each year to collect their 'cut'."

José laughed, "Awesome! Even in *Trek*, the government still gets its cut!"

"That episode has some of the best gag lines in the entire series. If you ever have a chance to see it on reruns, check it out. Even if you aren't a *Trek* fan, it's pretty funny."

"Let's just say Dona isn't a Sci-Fi fan. At all."

"I've been lucky in that regard," I replied. "I usually just have to trade some romantic comedy for the Sci-Fi."

"I'll have to see those movies with my guy friends if Dona and I stay together after graduation."

"Not a sure thing?"

He shrugged, "Who knows, right? Anyway, wanna jam for a bit?"

"Sure. I have a couple of hours before I need to be flogged!"

"Flogged?" he asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Golf spelled backwards is 'flog'!" I chuckled. "I'm not very good, but it makes my future father-in-law happy, and he insists it'll help meet people I need to know in the future and that it's something doctors do."

"I'd say that's a small price to pay to keep him happy."

"My thoughts exactly! Go get your guitar."



May 2, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Thursday morning I put the finishing touches on my proposed valedictory speech and walked it over to Chancellor Evans' office for review. Only Clarissa and Robby had seen it, and both had made a few suggestions, which I'd taken to heart. I left the speech with Chancellor Evans' secretary, then headed back to the dorm to hang out with Clarissa. I put on *Around the World in a Day*, made some tea, and we sat close together on the couch.

"When will you find out if your speech is OK?"

"His secretary said he would read it in the next day or two, and she'll call me to set up an appointment to see him. I can't imagine he's going to have any objections. You and Robby both felt it was good and only suggested a few changes."

"I was surprised you chose Robby to read it."

"I wanted a guy's perspective in addition to a girl's, and he's my best guy friend here. José was my second choice, but he's just finishing his Sophomore year. Robby is a year ahead of him and a year behind us."

"I'm really going to miss hanging out with the gang."

"Me, too," I agreed. "But most of them are going to be around, at least for another year."

"True, though not living in the dorm and having so much studying to do will put a crimp in that, not to mention you being married."

"You're going to be in the same basic situation, simply *sans* government paperwork! And Jason and Fran are getting the paperwork."

"That surprised the heck out of me!"

"Me, too! But I think what's happening is normal for college graduates. Dale is moving to Seattle for work, and Clark is moving to Chicago. We know a number of other students who are doing the same thing. Sandy, you, and I are going to be together because we made a pact to all go to the same medical school. The only reason Fran chose McKinley Medical School is because Jason is going to get his Master's here at Taft."

"Oh, I know. I guess I'm just a bit melancholy because I love our group here. Changing subjects slightly, but actually not really, where are you going to have your Sunday thing with Tasha, Nik, Alyssa, and Mark?"

"Our cottage, once they move north. It'll be cozy, but it'll work for six. One of the things on Elizaveta's wish list for wedding gifts is a card table and four folding chairs. The dinette table in the cottage can seat four reasonably comfortably, but that's it."

"You don't seem as if you're bothered by the changes."

I shrugged, "I'll miss this, but the only way to achieve our goals is to move forward. As Paul tells the Corinthians -- *'Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.'*"

"So 'keep your eyes on the prize' is a Biblical idiom?"

"It is, along with 'bite the dust', 'go the extra mile', 'the skin of his teeth', 'drop in the bucket', 'a leopard cannot change his spots', 'a thorn in the flesh', 'feet of clay', 'a fly in the ointment', 'a house divided against itself cannot stand', 'out of the mouths of babes', and a host of others including the very obvious 'writing on the wall'! And there are Shakespearean idioms as well -- 'break the ice' and 'the game is afoot' are two examples which were coined by him."

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that so many common phrases we use every day come from the Bible and Shakespeare."

"Both widely read and highly popular. How about 'By Jove, I think he has got it!'?"

"Jupiter, right?"

"Yes, and used so that one wouldn't use the word 'God'. It's like 'gadzooks' or 'gee whiz'. Anyway, my point was, we have to keep our eyes on the prize -- medical licenses. I'm not nearly as obsessive about it as I was, but I've been prepared for having to give up a lot to reach my goal. And if you'll excuse a bit of blasphemy -- what does it profit me if I gain the world and fail to get my medical license?"

Clarissa laughed, "I suspect you won't be teaching THAT in Sunday School!"

I chuckled, "Not a chance. And I'd only ever say it to you because I know you'll understand my point. When I started, I was prepared to sacrifice everything except my faith on the altar of the Ohio Medical Licensing Board. With help from my friends, especially you, I figured out that there were some things I simply couldn't sacrifice, you being the first and foremost. Once I admitted that to myself, then I reordered my priorities.

"That said, there is no way I'm going to simply just 'walk away', which is what I probably would have done if I still had the same philosophy I had when I arrived at Taft. I'll do my best, within the limits which are imposed on us by the medical profession training program, to keep people like Robby, Lee, Clark, Milena, and most importantly, you, as friends. Does that mean I won't miss this? No, of course not. But things change, and we need to adapt and move forward. After all, what's the alternative?"

"Have you ever had this idyllic dream of everything being perfect and nothing ever changing?"

"Heaven? Or what Western Christians think is heaven?"

"Wait! Isn't it perfect, and nothing ever changes?"

"It's the experience of the fullness of God's love for eternity. What that actually means, nobody knows. But the notion of floating around with wings and playing the harp, or whatever the current fad about heaven and hell happens to be, isn't accurate. And before you ask, I have no idea exactly what it will be like because nobody has come back to tell us except in metaphor. Honestly, do you think there is some physical throne on which an elderly bearded guy is sitting?"

"No, of course not!"

"And yet, that's the image that so many people have in their minds."

"I was thinking more about a daydream...the perfect time, place, and people."

"Utopia!" I grinned. "Which literally means 'no place'!"

"Will you just stop!" Clarissa demanded, laughing.

"Sorry. I guess I don't really daydream that way. If you think about it, at least from my perspective at the time, my life growing up was pretty idyllic. The one complaint I ever really had was not being able to have a steady girlfriend until I was a Senior, and really, I spent so much time with Jocelyn and Dale that it didn't upset me."

"And the whole getting laid thing?" Clarissa asked with a smirk.

"A bit of frustration, but it never made me feel as if my life was bad or anything."

"I think the bottom line is you got to be you and could express yourself without any concerns. My life wasn't anything like that, at least not once I realized I liked girls, not boys. But I'm curious, would you go back to that idyllic life?"

"Remember, I've had one driving force from fourth grade onward, so, no, I wouldn't want to go back. Being stuck in that idyllic world with no way to achieve my goal would be my own personal version of hell."

"That sounds Buddhist; you know, the endless wheel you want to escape."

"True, but it would also mean I never met you, Lissa. And that is something I would never, ever give up."

I put my arm around her and pulled her closer to me for just a minute.

"That is the one thing I'd change if I could," she sighed when I moved my arm away. "But I understand Elizaveta's limits. She's been very, very tolerant of the time we spend together."

"And we want to make sure we don't give her a reason not to be!"



May 3, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Friday afternoon, after she arrived home from school, Elizaveta drove to Taft and joined Dona to listen to José and me practice for our concert. Doctor Blahnik had invited the four of us, plus Milena, Joel, Clarissa, and Abby, for dinner after the concert, and we'd all accepted. We spent about an hour going through our routine, then the four of us went to the diner for shakes and fries.

"What would you think of playing two concerts next year with the band at Taft?" José asked.

"You don't want to find another guitar player?" I asked.

"Doctor Blahnik asked me about that. I've been talking to a guy on the 2nd floor of the dorm who plays, but he's not up for playing in an auditorium. He'll play in the dorm with me, but not public concerts. She asked about the band, and I told her I'd have to talk to you."

"Are we going to have enough time to practice?"

"If you can find a couple of hours on Saturday morning each week, I think so. Sticks and Kim can meet as early as 6:00am, and Doctor Blahnik offered access to the music room we've been using."

"I think you should, Mike," Elizaveta said.

"That's a 'yes', then," José grinned. "We all know who's in control in a marriage to a Russian woman!"

"And to one who's one-eighth Cherokee!" Dona said mirthfully.

"You?" Elizaveta asked.

"Yes. My mom's dad's mom was full-blooded Cherokee."

"I was more interested in the 'marriage' part!" I grinned. "That's new!"

Elizaveta laughed, "She's had him sized up for a ring for at least six months! And he knows it, too!"

"And how long did you have ME sized up for marriage?" I asked.

Elizaveta giggled softly, "From about thirteen, but I figured I'd lose to Tasha, or if not her, Angie, Katy, Oksana, or Yuliana."

"So, right after I started coming to Saint Michael the Archangel?"

"Pretty much! But I figured by the time I was eighteen, it would be too late. Then I saw you with non-Orthodox girls and decided somebody had to put a stop to it!"

I chuckled, "An intervention?"

"Only after Angie had her serious health issues and Tasha let it be known she was giving up her claim."

José laughed, "Nice! Do all the girls at church honor those claims?"

"Usually," Elizaveta said. "The only real 'cat fight' I recall was when I was six or seven, and two girls both wanted the same guy and really got into it over him. He ended up marrying a Roman Catholic and left the church."

"You're not blaming those girls, are you?" Dona asked.

Elizaveta shrugged, "Who knows? If they hadn't been so mean to each other and torpedoed each other with him, maybe he would have married one of them."

"I suppose," Dona allowed. "Though you never know."

"True. We all thought Mike would marry Tasha. I mean, I knew they were basically a couple when he started coming to Saint Michael. I would never have done anything to interfere, but things worked out!"

"And you'll be happy being a housewife?"

"Why not? It's what I want to do. I might work part-time before we have our first baby, but after that, yes, I want to be a mom and a wife. And I'll have a lot to do at church, too, as a Deacon's wife. I'm not sure if Mike explained, but it really is a joint ministry, even if he wears the vestments."

"Can I ask why Elias and Serafima were matched so early?" I inquired.

"Their grandfathers came from the same small village in Russia and are best of friends. But they each only had boys!"

I chuckled, "That might be a small impediment to a marriage between the families!"

"As soon as she was born, Elias' grandfather asked Serafima's grandfather. They've been together longer than you and Jocelyn were. It was kindergarten, right?"

"Yes."

"Elias was about four months old when Serafima was born, and they met, if you want to call it that, at her churching!"

"Churching?" Dona asked.

"Traditionally, a woman stays home from church for forty days after she gives birth. Baby boys are brought to the church on the eighth day in memory of Jesus being brought to the temple. Girls are brought on the fortieth day."

"Wait!" Dona exclaimed. "The baby is baptized without his mom there?"

"No. Baptisms usually occur on the fortieth day. A churching is just a prayer, and the baby boy is carried around the altar."

"But not girls?"

"Traditionally, no. Some parishes do that, but not ours."

"That just seems wrong," Dona protested.

"In modern times, those traditions are mostly winked at," I replied. "There are some parishes which are very traditional in that way, but you've been to our

church, and I'm sure you've noticed that a majority of the women and girls don't wear scarves. At some parishes, they have extra scarves, and if a woman shows up there without one, someone will strongly encourage her to wear one. I've actually never been to a parish like that, so I'm just relaying what I've heard.

"We do follow the tradition of boys being carried into the altar at their churching, but we don't follow the eight days or forty days as a parish. Some people will follow that tradition and have a churching on the exact day, but for the most part, they just do it on a convenient Sunday morning. And baptisms are usually scheduled for Sunday mornings as well. And before you ask, I'm going to leave that decision to Elizaveta because I'm not a rigorist."

"Oh, right!" Dona laughed. "I see how strictly you follow the rules."

"He does," Elizaveta said. "But those are his rules and his choices. They'll change when we're married because we'll have a set of family rules."

"Remember," I said gently, "they are rules like a ruler or measuring stick, not like laws, and the only person we measure ourselves against is ourselves. I'll leave it to Elizaveta to decide when to come to church after we have our children, and we'll discuss churching together."

"I like those traditions," Elizaveta said, "but scheduling a baptism in the middle of the week would be super inconvenient for our families if they wanted to attend. And our bishop isn't a rigorist about such things."

"But he is strict about no women ministers, right?"

"All Orthodox are," Elizaveta said. "But only in the sense of ordained clergy. And really, that's only about serving in the altar. I can do any other ministry, and I will. There are no restrictions, and I know parishes that have women Parish Council presidents. Nobody even blinks at that."

"I'm Roman Catholic," José said, "and we have the same basic rules, though we don't ordain married men in the Latin Rite. The Byzantine Rite does, for historical reasons, and there are some married priests who converted from the Episcopal Church. Believe it or not, that is something that could change with a simple decree from the Pope, though I don't expect John Paul II to issue a decree such as that in my lifetime."

"You don't go to church very often," Dona said.

José shrugged, "At home with my mom because it makes her happy, plus Easter and Christmas. I've been to Mike's church more than the Catholic church since I've been at Taft."

"I've been at Mike's church more than I've been in ANY church in my life," Dona laughed. "My parents weren't churchgoers at all, though they did read the Bible and pray."

We finished our snack and headed back to Doctor Blahnik's house to hang out until it was time to leave for the concert. We couldn't hang out in my room because Elizaveta wasn't allowed into the dorms. We were joined by some of the gang, and then Elizaveta went with Clarissa, Jocelyn, Abby, and Gene while I went back to my room to change. Fifteen minutes later, José and I were waiting backstage for Robby and Lee to introduce us. They hammed it up pretty well, and had the audience laughing, then called us on stage. Sticks' drums and Kim's keyboard were set up but covered with lightweight black tarps so as not to give anything away.

We kicked off our first set with *Born to Run*, which we'd usually saved for close to the end, but José had suggested it was a way to get the audience really fired up, and it was obvious from the start that he was correct in his assessment. We played through our first set, switching off on the patter, until we played *Ready to*

Take a Chance Again as our penultimate song for the first set. Robby and Lee came out on stage at that point.

"We have something special for you tonight," Robby said. "A sneak preview, if you will."

Sticks and Kim came onto the stage and uncovered their instruments. I walked to the side of the stage and put on a blue surgical scrub shirt and José put on his Chelsea jersey, then got his harmonica and the neck brace he used so he could play his guitar at the same time. We took our places.

"For the first time anywhere," Lee said, "Please allow me to introduce Code Blue!"

Kim led off with the keyboards, José joined in with the harmonica, and Sticks with the drums. At my cue, I began singing.

The students and others in the auditorium erupted in applause and cheers but quickly quieted down to listen. Our timing was slightly off, and each of us made small mistakes, but overall, I was happy with how it turned out. The audience was ecstatic and gave us a standing ovation when we finished. We all took our bows and left the stage.

"Mike has some fairly important things to attend to over the Summer!" Lee announced once the applause died down.

"So, look for more about Code Blue this Fall," Robby added. "And now, we'll have a fifteen-minute intermission."

They came backstage, where the four of us were drinking water and relaxing on a pair of couches.

"Damn!" Lee exclaimed. "I was blown away!"

"And now I see why you wanted to keep it a surprise and only told us at the last minute!" Robby added. "Holy crap!"

"It wasn't THAT good," Kim said, shaking her head. "We need a lot more practice."

"I don't think anyone out there cares!" Robby declared. "Can you guys play anything else?"

"Not really," José said. "That's the only thing we've practiced enough to play in public."

"You know we COULD play *It's Still Rock and Roll to Me*," Sticks said. "We do that pretty well."

"I think you should," Doctor Blahnik said, coming in through the door which led to the auditorium. "They'll love it. There's a huge buzz."

I shrugged, "I'm game if everyone else is. That song is on the playlist for our second set. We could move it to the end and make it our third encore."

"That's a fantastic idea, Mike!" Doctor Blahnik said.

"I suppose I'm in," Kim said.

"Then I'm in, too," José said.

"How do you want to handle it?" I asked.

"I think we play our encores as usual, and then Kim and Sticks come out just as we finish."

That is what we did, and we nearly brought the house down because nobody expected a third encore, and certainly not by our new band. The applause and cheering were deafening, and we all held hands to take our bows before heading backstage.

"Too bad all three of you have girlfriends," Kim teased. "I saw a dozen girls who were groupie material!"

"No guys?" I chuckled.

"Guys ALWAYS want to have sex!" she laughed. "It's the women who have to be talked into it! Or sung into it!"

"You don't know Mike very well!" Milena teased, coming in with her mom.

"Behave!" I ordered, knowing it was futile.

Fortunately, Elizaveta and Dona came in just then, so Milena knew she couldn't tease. José and I both got hugs and kisses and then a beautiful black girl came in and planted a huge kiss on Sticks.

"This is my girlfriend, Jacqui," he said. "We've been dating since midway through Senior year."

We all greeted her and introduced ourselves.

"Shall we go see our adoring public?" José asked.

We all laughed and left the room through the door to the hall, where we were mobbed by other students. I extricated myself and walked down the hallway to where Father Nicholas and Matushka Natalya were standing with their two sons. I asked for Father's blessing, and he gave it.

"Very well done, Michael," he said after I kissed his hand.

"Thank you," I replied. "We need some work!"

He laughed, "For a college cover band, you did a fantastic job!"

"So you're saying Billy Joel has nothing to worry about?" I asked with a grin.

"I suspect he won't be a doctor or a deacon, and you have no plans to be a professional musician, so I think you're both safe!"

"Did you see anything that you think might cause trouble with any of the older ladies?"

"Considering Elizaveta's grandmothers were here and clapping as loudly as anyone, I can't imagine!"

I laughed, "I had no idea they would be here!"

"I think if they're happy, the rest of the ladies will be fine. I'll see you at church tomorrow."

"Thanks, Father."

I left him and went back to where my bandmates were standing and talked with students who basically had only one question -- when would we play again? And that was something none of us knew. When the crowd finally dissipated, we

thanked Robby and Lee, then gathered our things and took them back to the dorm. Dona waited with Elizaveta while we went upstairs, and then the four of us, plus Abby and Clarissa, headed to Doctor Blahnik's house for dinner.

"And to think you refused to be my singing partner!" Milena said, trying to sound annoyed.

"I didn't have the time my first two years," I protested. "And we did sing together on occasion!"

"Leaving me with lame partners from the music department!"

"That sounds like a problem for the Head of the Music Department," I grinned. "I mean, she's the one who accepts the graduate students, right?"

Doctor Blahnik laughed, "Just as there was only one man who could ever be her husband, there was only one man she wanted as her singing partner."

"I think she got the better of the two options," I said.

Joel smiled, "Me, too!"

"Will you have some wine with us, Mike?" Derek asked as he handed out glasses.

"Sure," I replied, accepting a glass of white wine from him.

"Mike," Doctor Blahnik said. "Derek, Milena, Joel, and I have a graduation gift for you."

Joel ducked out of the room and came back carrying a silver platter on which sat a beautiful ceramic teapot and eight Russian-style tea glasses in silver holders.

"A must-have for any proper Russian household," Derek declared with a faux Russian accent.

"«Спасибо» (*spasibo*)! Thank you very, very much!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, thank you!" Elizaveta said happily. "It's beautiful!"

"With your permission, Elizaveta," Doctor Blahnik said, "I'd like to give Mike a hug."

"Of course it's OK!" Elizaveta said.

I got very nice hugs and kisses on the cheek from Doctor Blahnik and Milena and hearty handshakes from Derek and Joel.

"Shall we eat?" Doctor Blahnik asked.

"Yes!" came the chorus, and we all moved to the dining room for dinner.

LXII. Looks Like We Made It

May 7, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday morning, I went to Chancellor Evans' office for a 9:00am appointment, which had been scheduled by his secretary when she called me on Monday afternoon.

"Overall, I like it," he said. "I half expected to find a note that said you were going to play your guitar! I very much enjoyed the concert, and I was surprised that you're forming a band."

"José is the driving force, and Elizaveta encouraged me to do it as a way to relax and take my mind off my studies for a few hours each week."

"But you were playing either solo or with Milena Blahnik, sorry, Greene, before, right?"

"Yes, that's true, and that was at the encouragement of both Doctor Blahnik and Milena. As I said, I'm not big on public speaking or performances."

"Well, you could have fooled me! And your two friends did a great job as MCs. Anyway, back to your speech. I made a few notes in blue, some things for you to consider. That said, you are absolutely free to give the speech as written. Don't think of the blue pencil as corrections, please; consider them to be suggestions for edits. I'm assuming you had someone read this over before you handed it in?"

"Clarissa and Robby both read it and made suggestions, which I incorporated."

"I think what I wrote is self-explanatory, but if you have any questions, please call. I look forward to hearing you deliver this speech."

"Thank you!"

We shook hands, and I headed back to the dorm. I made some tea and sat down to review the notations which Chancellor Evans had made on the pages. His comments and suggested edits were mostly good, though there were one or two where he tried to correct a Biblical idiom to 'proper' English. There were a few places where he asked questions for clarification, and I made some notes on how to say what it was I wanted to say more clearly. I looked at the clock and decided I had more than enough time to go to the computer lab so I could edit my document. Kristin had impressed on me the need to have an original and a backup, so I grabbed the two floppy disks, which really were rigid, not floppy, and headed to the computer lab.

I completed my changes and printed out two copies, and when I went back to the dorm, I gave one to Clarissa and one to Robby so they could proofread. Once they had their copies, we headed to lunch with the gang. After lunch, Clarissa and I walked to the clinic where Abby worked so I could have my pre-marital blood test. Abby promised the results no later than Friday afternoon. We walked back to campus and I read for an hour, then headed to the Country Club for a round of golf with Viktor and a nice dinner in the Clubhouse dining room.



May 10, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

The week after the concert had flown by, and I had my first free Friday evening in a long time. I couldn't spend it with Clarissa because she was at the bridal shower the girls were throwing for Elizaveta at Doctor Blahnik's, from which I had been firmly but tactfully asked to stay away. The chances I'd cross a

collection of budding members of the «съборъ бабушек» (*sobor babushki*) were near zero, as it would make the next seventy or eighty years my own personal hell on earth! ("Grandmothers Cabal")

"So, what are we doing tonight, just us boys?" Robby asked as he, Lee, José, Gene, Pete, Jason, Brandon, Jack, and I walked to dinner.

"It is pretty strange not having any of the girls around!" Jack said. "But I was warned that if I came within a hundred feet of Doctor Blahnik's house, I'd regret it for the rest of my very short life!"

All the guys laughed.

"Hey, YOU chose to date a Russian girl!" Robby countered.

"I think we ALL got that same speech!" Brandon said. "Though Kimiko was a bit more circumspect about asking me to stay away."

"What exactly happens at a bridal shower?" Jason asked.

"Nobody knows," I replied piously. "It appears to be a very closely held secret!"

"Unlike bachelor parties," Pete added. "Everyone knows what happens at those!"

"Not Mike's," Robby said. "I received clear instructions from Sophia about what was, and what wasn't, acceptable for a future 'man of the cloth!'"

"This group is the least likely to get arrested of ANY group you could name at Taft!" José declared.

"So, what *are* we doing?" Lee asked.

"There's a Jazz group playing at Milton Lake," José said. "They serve beer."

"Sounds like a winner," I said. "Dinner and Jazz."

There was agreement from the other guys, so after we ate dinner in the cafeteria, we got into three cars and headed for Milton Lake. When we arrived, we got in line to get drinks, then found places to sit on the grass not too far from the stage.

"Anybody know how late this party is going to run?" Jack asked.

"Sophia's comment was, 'Do not wait up'," Robby replied.

"That's what Jocelyn said to me, too," Gene added. "I have a feeling they're going to stumble in around 3:00am!"

"Most of Elizaveta's friends can't legally drink," I said. "So I doubt anyone will be drunk. Doctor Blahnik will let them drink responsibly, though."

"She's been playing mom to you for a long time now," Brandon said.

"Yeah, if your mom wanted to sleep with you!" José said.

"What did I miss?"

"Nothing!" I said quickly.

"She's had the hots for Mike for years," Robby said with a sly grin. "But she's a professor, and he's getting married the day after graduation!"

"She's smoking hot!" Brandon declared. "And so is her daughter!"

"Guys," I said firmly, "please do NOT mention Doctor Blahnik flirting with me. It could get her in trouble and would really upset Elizaveta."

"Sorry, man," José said. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"I trust everyone here," I said. "But it's safer to just leave it unsaid."

About fifteen minutes after we'd sat down, the concert began. The group was really good, and José and I exchanged looks which communicated our thoughts -- when we jammed, it was nothing like this. At the first break we got another round of drinks, though I opted for Coke rather than beer, and did the same after the second set. When the concert finished, we headed back to Taft, and the guys came to my room to hang out. We listened to music and talked until just after 1:00am. The girls hadn't returned, so the guys all headed to bed.



May 11, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Saturday morning, I called Liz, my grandparents, and my parents to remind them about our family dinner with the Kozlovs at the Country Club on Sunday afternoon.

"How are things between Paul and Dad?" I asked when I spoke to Liz, whom I called first.

"No change, really. Mostly, I just visit with Mom because Dad still can't accept that I married Paul. Mom said Dad promised to be polite and not cause a scene at dinner. And you know Paul; he's a sweetheart."

A 'sweetheart' who cheated on his wife with a fourteen-year-old girl, I thought, but didn't say. And really, I needed to get past those kinds of thoughts. Paul was

my brother-in-law, and he obviously loved Liz, no matter what mistakes he'd made in the past.

"I'm not sure I'd call a male friend a sweetheart, so I'll take your word for it!"

"Fine! He treats me right!"

"Which is all that matters when it comes right down to it. Mom is OK with him?"

"I wouldn't go THAT far, but she's sociable and doesn't treat him like a leper. I heard Mindy is coming to the wedding."

"I hadn't even thought to invite her," I said. "We rarely see each other. Who is Emmy bringing?"

"John Rivers. He's a dispatcher at the Sheriff's Department. You didn't invite Maggie, did you?"

"No. I told you I ran into her at the mall. Mindy says she's dating Mike Palmer."

"I'm pretty sure they're engaged."

"That was quick," I replied.

"Says my brother, who went from barely knowing Elizaveta to being betrothed in a few months!"

"Not everyone is as big an idiot as I am!"

Liz laughed, "Marrying a sexy sixteen-year-old? No. Agreeing to be ordained? Yes!"

"Neither of those makes me an idiot, despite your feelings to the contrary about church. It was the whirlwind romance."

"Which was only necessary because you were dumb enough to agree to let the bishop ordain you!"

"At the specific request of the Parish Council."

"You do know there's this word in the English language -- 'no' -- right? And that it's possible to say to a bishop just as you can to anyone else?"

"Can we just agree to disagree, please? I'm not going to change in that regard, and even though I hope you do, I'm not expecting it."

"Don't hold your breath! Anyway, we'll see you tomorrow!"

"Thanks, Liz. See you!"

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up and made the other two calls. Once I finished, I sat down with Robby and Clarissa to go over my revised commencement speech. They both felt that it was in a state where changes wouldn't really improve it, other than noting one typographical error, which I would correct for the final copy from which I'd read at the graduation ceremony. I hoped the weather was nice on graduation day because rain would mean a change of venue, and that would mean tickets would be necessary, and nobody was allowed more than four.

That would exclude everyone except my parents, my sister, and Elizaveta, and would seriously disappoint my grandparents, Elizaveta's parents, Father Nicholas and his wife, and my friends who weren't Seniors. I'd already arranged with Clarissa for Jocelyn to have her fourth ticket if it came to that because

Clarissa was only inviting her parents and Abby. Dale would get a ticket from José, if necessary, as he was only inviting his parents and Dona.

Lee, Sophia, Jocelyn, José, and Dona came into the room once we opened the door.

"Has it sunk in that two weeks from tomorrow, you'll be married?" José asked.

"That's when he'll finally get to 'sink in' to his *pussy cat*," Clarissa giggled.

"Ignore her!" I said firmly, then switched to a teasing voice, "She's just jealous!"

"Me, too!" Lee declared, then paused for a beat before adding, "Of Elizaveta!"

Everyone laughed.

"Rumor has it that Clark is jealous of Mike!" Jocelyn said with a smirk.

"Now I really AM jealous of Elizaveta!" Lee smirked.

"Great," Robby answered with a silly grin, "my boyfriend has become a 'size queen'."

"You guys are BAD!" Dona said, shaking her head.

"Why do I suddenly feel inadequate?" José asked with a grin, indicating he was teasing.

"You boys and your dicks!" Sophia laughed, shaking her head. "If Dona isn't complaining, then don't worry about it!!"

"Where's Gene?" I asked Jocelyn, hoping to change the subject.

"In the computer lab. He's setting up some kind of fluid dynamics program he has to run on the mainframe. He's doing it today because computer time is cheaper on the weekend."

"How does that work?"

"He's allocated a certain amount of money towards mainframe usage. If he goes over that, he has to pay it himself if he's not done with all of his work. He's under his budget, but just barely, so he's setting it up to run overnight tonight."

"Did he write the program?" Robby asked.

"Yeah, it's part of the class. It's in FORTRAN, which is big in the scientific community, and Taft requires you learn it to complete the physics program."

"We had to write a couple of FORTRAN programs in our CS class," I replied. "And I remember Kristin mentioning other languages called 'Pascal' and 'C'," I said. "But it's all effectively Greek to me!"

"Do I get to say it's all Russian to me?" Sophia asked, causing everyone to laugh.

"So," José said, "back to my question before Clarissa totally derailed the conversation..."

"Yes and no," I replied. "I mean, I know it's happening, and I'm looking forward to it, but it doesn't seem real yet. «Закрой свой рот» (*Zakroy svooy rot*), Svetlana Yakovovna! I see that smirk!" ("Shut your mouth!")

"Wow," she snickered. "You are just NO fun! But at least you didn't call me a «сука»!"

"That's what Tasha said to Janey, right?" Jocelyn asked.

"How do YOU know?" I inquired.

"Girls talk! I asked her about it. She told me the other thing she said to Janey, too!"

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Dona said.

"That her «пизда» (*pizda*) must be pretty rotten because after Mike had it, he went back to Tasha, and Tasha was still a virgin!" ("pussy")

"I rue the day I introduced all of you," I said, shaking my head.

"You know we won't say anything in front of Elizaveta or anyone who might take it the wrong way," Jocelyn replied. "But come on, Mik, you and Tasha have changed significantly from when you were in High School, and these stories show just how far both of you have come. That's especially true about both of you being able to talk this way in front of others."

"Says the woman who had hissy fits when Dale, Karl, and I said anything even SLIGHTLY risqué!"

"I've changed, too!"

"True," I replied. "And that's the basic theme of my commencement speech. Not you personally, but about growth and maturity and change."

"That's going to be a heck of a weekend!" she replied. "Two parties, graduation, your wedding, and the reception. Then a trip to Niagara Falls and your trip to Europe."

"I'll sleep on the plane!" I chuckled.

"Rebekah told me about the 'Mile-High Club'," José said.

"That might work in a private plane," Robby said. "But on a passenger jet? Where? The lavatory? That's disgusting!"

"I have to agree," Sophia said. "Mike, have you flown before?"

"Nope. First time. It'll be my first time out of the country and my first time on a train once we get to Europe."

"Have any of you been to Europe?" Sophia asked.

"I know Pete went to England when he was little," I replied, "but I don't know about Abby."

"She went to France and Italy the Summer after she graduated from High School," Clarissa said.

"How is she getting the time off?" Sophia asked.

"She's saved up enough vacation time," Clarissa replied. "And there are nurses from the hospital who are always looking for hours, so the clinic has no trouble finding people to cover shifts."

"What are the rest of you doing over the Summer?" I asked.

"Being bums in Lima!" Sophia laughed. "All three of us."

"Gene and I are going to Myrtle Beach with his parents in July," Jocelyn said.

"Otherwise, just being a bum like Robby, Lee, and Sophia!"

"I'm taking Dona to visit my grandparents in Buenos Aires," José said.

"It's Winter there during our Summer, right?" I asked.

"Yes, but the normal temperature ranges between about 45°F and 60°F. It can be as much as twenty degrees warmer, and it can drop for a few days when cold air moves in from Antarctica. The last major snowfall was in 1918 when they had the coldest day on record, which was 22°F."

"That's a freaking heatwave for January here!" Dona said, shaking her head. "I wouldn't mind living someplace where it never got below freezing!"

"Not never, but rarely," José said. "The further north you go, the warmer it gets. But Buenos Aires is really nice."

"The name means 'fair winds', right?" Sophia asked.

"Yes, though like Los Angeles, it has a very long original name -- «Ciudad de la Santísima Trinidad y Puerto de Santa María del Buen Aire»; 'City of the Most Holy Trinity and Port of Holy Mary of the Fair Winds'. That's Mary, the Mother of God, who was a patron for the sailors who first founded the city."

"What is Los Angeles' full name?" Dona asked.

"It's also named for Mary, the Mother of God -- «El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles»; 'The Village of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels'."

"So not 'The City of Angels', Jocelyn asked."

"No, but modern usage is just 'Los Angeles', so it makes sense. Quite a few cities in California have really long original names; Texas and New Mexico, too. For

example, San Jose is «Pueblo de San José de Guadalupe», or 'Village of Saint Joseph of Guadalupe'. Santa Fe, New Mexico, is «La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asís», or 'The Royal Village of the Holy Faith of Saint Francis of Assisi', which means it's actually the same as San Francisco, which was also named after Saint Francis of Assisi."

"Were you born in Argentina?" Robby asked.

"No. My parents moved to the US before I was born. My dad worked for Grumman Aerospace, eventually as part of the team designing and building the Lunar Module. After that program ended, and Rockwell won the Space Shuttle contract, he took a job with GE out east, then was transferred to Cincinnati three years ago."

"What does he work on?"

"Mostly turbine engines for military helicopters, though there are versions for civilian aircraft."

"Dona, what does your dad do?"

"He's a machine tool operator at GE. He and José's dad didn't know each other before we started dating."

Gene came into the room just then and plopped down on the couch next to Jocelyn.

"All set?" Jocelyn asked.

"The test ran OK, so I scheduled the main run for tonight. I won't know if it's OK until tomorrow morning."

"How will you know?" I asked.

"My results have to match the ones the professor obtained. He gave us a small test set, and my results matched, so it should be OK with the full data set. I'll compare the results he provided for the full set in the morning."

"That seems pretty advanced for a Freshman."

"Honors," he replied. "I had a couple of computer classes in my High School and worked in the computer lab. We had Apple IIs, TRS-80s, and Commodore PETs. Dad bought me a computer when I was fifteen, after my first computer class. That let me skip the computer class here. I also tested out of first-semester physics and first-semester calculus."

"Damn!" Lee replied. "Can I ask about your SAT and ACT scores?"

"1560 and a 34 composite."

"And you came to Taft?"

He shrugged, "Nerd from a small town. I wasn't interested in going to a big school. Being here has helped, and I'll likely go to Ohio State for my Master's and PhD."

"How long does the PhD take?" I asked.

"Four to six years," he said, "a lot depends on the research and progress through the courses."

"So about twelve years, total, then? Similar to our training as doctors, including medical school and Residency?"

"Pretty much. Jocelyn has it easy -- seven years, and she's part of the American gentry! We don't usually go for coats of arms or titles of nobility here, but lawyers LOVE that kind of thing, so they tack 'Esquire' onto their names to raise them above the «hoi polloi»."

"Yes, God forbid some pleb or prole forget that lawyers are the new patricians!" Robby teased.

"What is this?" Jocelyn asked. "Pick on lawyers day?"

"That's EVERY day!" José teased.

"Just as every day is 'pick on Mike' day!" Clarissa declared gleefully.

"Gee, thanks, Lissa. I love you, too!"

"Chill out, Petrovich!"

"Gene," I said, hoping, once again, to change the subject, "Does testing out of those classes mean you have to take less overall?"

He laughed, "Of course not! You pay for the tests and you still pay full tuition and still have to take the required credit hours. But it's cool because I can take three more physics electives."

"Ugh. Two college-level physics classes were more than enough for me!"

"Electro and mechanics, right?"

"Yes."

"I won't trade for your advanced biochemistry classes with those labs I've seen you and Fran do!"

"I remember something Mr. Black said about labs," Jocelyn interjected. "He said that you look at an experiment, and if it's green and wriggles, it's biology; if it stinks to high heaven, it's chemistry; if it fails, it's physics."

Gene laughed, then said, "A neutron walks into a bar and asks, 'How much for a gin and tonic?'. The bartender smiles wryly and replies, 'For you, no charge.'."

"Boo!" came a chorus from everyone in the room except Gene.

"One atom says to another atom, 'Hey, I think I lost an electron!'. The other one asks, 'Are you sure?'. The first one replies, 'Yes, I'm positive.'."

Everyone else in the room groaned.

"On THAT note, it's time for lunch!" Clarissa declared.

Gene smirked, "Heisenberg and Schrödinger are driving down the road when a cop pulls them over. The cop asks Heisenberg, 'Do you know how fast you were going back there?' Heisenberg replies, 'No, but I can tell you exactly where I was.' The cop begins to be suspicious and proceeds to search the car. Upon opening the trunk, he exclaims, 'Hey, you have a dead cat back here', to which Schrödinger replies, 'Well, thanks to you, I do now!'."

"Let's go before he jokes again!" Robby said, standing up.

Everyone laughed, and we headed for the cafeteria for lunch. After lunch, I headed to Elizaveta's house to spend the afternoon before Vespers. When I arrived, Viktor asked to talk to me, so we went to his study.

"I have everything arranged for the marriage license. I was thinking Tuesday afternoon would be a good time to go to the County Clerk's office. Golf can wait until you come back from Europe. Did you get your blood test results?"

"Yesterday. And that plan is fine with me," I replied. "What do I need?"

"Just your ID and the test results. I have the notarized forms Yulia and I signed, giving Elizaveta permission to marry, as well as the required minister's statement. Just come here on Tuesday instead of meeting me at the Country Club."

"Minister's statement?" I asked.

"The Hayes County Clerk requires a statement from a minister agreeing to the marriage. Some counties do; some don't. Vladyka ARKADY signed the statement because he's officiating at your wedding."

"What does it say?"

"Just that he's agreed to perform the wedding and has no reservations. It's as much to protect him as it is anything. Basically, he acknowledges that Elizaveta is under eighteen and that he's ensured she has our permission and isn't being coerced."

"Interesting. Anything else I need to worry about?"

He shook his head, "Not in that regard. You should go to the Post Office and change your address so your mail is forwarded here, and you should change your driver's license and car registration as well."

"OK. I'll go to the BMV and Post Office and take care of those on Tuesday morning."

"Oh, and your voter registration as well."

"I can do that at the Student Life office on Tuesday, also."

"You know, we never spoke about it, but is your family Republican or Democrat?"

"I think we're what you would call 'Reagan Democrats', but when I've voted, I've always tried to choose the best man or woman without caring about party labels. I'm going to guess you're Republican?"

"One of the few in the church," he replied. "Nearly everyone at Saint Michael the Archangel is like your family -- conservative Democrat. But as a businessman, my priorities are more in tune with the Republicans, though I don't vote a straight party ticket."

"Politics is perhaps the least of my concerns," I replied.

"That will change," Viktor said knowingly. "I didn't care until I started raising a family and expanding my business. Suddenly, things like schools, property taxes, roads, business licenses, and income taxes became VERY important. For you, it'll be regulation in the medical community, at a minimum. That's true about most of the doctors I know -- they do get involved when something directly affects them, but otherwise, they mostly worry about their patients."

"One of my High School teachers, Mr. Black, made the point that if government is operating properly, we can mostly ignore it. It's when it fails to operate properly that people become active. He used the war in Viet Nam and Civil Rights as examples."

"So, as long as the trains run on time..."

"I'm no expert, but I think the Founders said something about a 'long train of abuses', and nobody is preventing me from going to church, saying what I want to say, doing what I want to do, and becoming what I want to be. The only minor hurdle the government has put in my way is that Elizaveta and I need your permission, and honestly, that's a minor hurdle."

Of course, there were the issues of the false accusations against me with regard to Liz and the harassment Clark received at the hands of the police, and while both of those were bad, the overall picture looked pretty good compared to countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

"Medical licensing?" he asked.

"Necessary, don't you think? I'm not sure I'd want just anyone to be able to claim to be a medical doctor without some kind of certification."

"I agree. I just wondered how you perceived that."

"I learned about licensing from my dad," I replied. "His point, and one that was made by my civics teachers, was that nobody would want to drive over a bridge built by someone with no knowledge of structural engineering. Somebody needs to certify that the person at least has a clue about building bridges before we let them do it for public use. I mean, if some guy wants to build his own bridge for his own use on his own land, that's no big deal. If, on the other hand, it's a public road, then I do care."

"Dad?" Elizaveta asked from the door to Viktor's study. "May I have my husband?"

"Yes. Two weeks from tomorrow, when he's actually your husband!"

She rolled her eyes.

"I think I'm required to go," I grinned.

"I think so, too!" Viktor agreed.

I left his study with Elizaveta, and we went to the backyard to sit on the bench in the garden.

"Did Dad tell you about Tuesday?"

"Yes. And about needing a statement from the bishop! I had no idea."

"Supposedly, it's to make sure my parents aren't coërcing me."

"I don't believe any coërcion on their part was necessary," I grinned. "I believe you took the bull by the horns, so to speak."

"Only because you were being a blockhead, husband!"

"In my defense, you were twelve when I came to Saint Michael and only turned fifteen last year! And if I HAD asked out one of the older girls, you might have lost out!"

She screwed up her face as she usually did when I made a point which was true but which she didn't like.

"That doesn't make you less of a blockhead about how you approached potential wives!"

I chuckled, "I think most men qualify as blockheads in that regard. But, was I a blockhead when I agreed with your insistent demand?"

"No! But that was just me being right! And you didn't put up much of a fight!"

"Your arguments were logical, and you made your points very well! It also didn't hurt that you're the prettiest girl in the church! I'll have good food, good housekeeping, and good sex! What more could a man want?"

Elizaveta blushed and giggled softly, "Good?"

"Hmm," I said, pretending to ponder, "your cooking is great, and your housekeeping appears to be great."

"AND?!" she demanded, hands on hips.

"Ask me two weeks from Monday!" I smirked. "If you can still talk!"

"We shall see, husband; we shall see!"



May 12, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

Sunday morning went as usual, with me picking up Elizaveta at her house, then driving to church, serving in the altar, and having a light lunch with the congregation following the Divine Liturgy. After church, we joined Nik, Tasha, Mark, and Alyssa at Tasha's apartment, though we wouldn't be staying for dinner.

"My parents decided to talk to Father Nicholas about becoming official catechumens," Alyssa said. "Do you think you'll be assigned to catechize them?"

"Probably not because I'll be gone for about six weeks, and then after I'm ordained, I have three weeks when I'll need to be at the Cathedral for all the services so I can learn to be a deacon, and then school starts."

"Don't you already know what to do?" Mark asked.

"In a general way, yes," I replied. "But it's better to be taught by another deacon to be sure. I've never done any of the things a deacon does, with the exception of the little litanies. Some things, such as reading the Gospel are simple; other things, such as the Eucharistic services, decidedly are not. I have a copy of the *Liturgikon* as it's called in English, but reading about something and actually doing it are very different."

I saw Tasha's lip begin to curl as she suppressed a smirk, meaning she was thinking the same thing I'd thought immediately after saying the words. I thought about the teasing Elizaveta and I had done, and one thing I was absolutely sure of, and that was that Nik was not going to be even semi-coherent the morning after his wedding night! Of course, Elizaveta was implying the same thing, but neither she, nor I, could actually know. I COULD know about Tasha, and to someone like Nik, she was going to be an eye-opening experience!

"Do you know who'll do the catechism?" Alyssa asked.

"It pretty much has to be Father Nicholas. I'm the only other qualified catechist at Saint Michael."

"But you'll do it in the future, right?"

"At some point, once I get settled into my routine in medical school. I will teach Sunday School, at least until Residency, when I'll have long shifts and can't really influence which ones I have until at least my second year."

"So you might miss church?"

"It's pretty likely," I said. "First-year Residents work two thirty-six-hour shifts and one twenty-four-hour shift, or some similar combination."

"No way!" she exclaimed. "You don't get to sleep?"

"They provide a cot," I replied. "But you're on call, so it's possible you don't."

"That sounds dangerous!"

I shrugged, "From what everyone has said, it's been this way for some time, so I have to guess it works OK, or we wouldn't have any doctors, or they would have changed the system."

"Wow!"

"It's part of the price, and I knew beforehand and talked to Elizaveta about it."

"So what will Father do without a deacon when you're working?" Mark asked.

"We'll cross that bridge in four years," I replied. "A lot can happen in four years."

"How did you become a subdeacon?" Alyssa asked.

"The bishop asked me," I replied. "It's the same way I became an acolyte and head acolyte, though that was Father Herman asking, rather than the bishop."

"Was it wrong for me to ask to serve?" Mark inquired.

"Not at all! You and I are different people. We approach things differently. It wasn't wrong for you to ask, and Father would have said something if he felt you weren't ready."

"One important thing to learn," Tasha said, "is that Father Nicholas will give you guidance when you need it. Talk to him and trust him, and follow his advice. Volunteering for service is a good thing. If Father doesn't believe you're ready, he'll let you know and help you work towards whatever it is you asked for, if it's the right thing to do."

"Remember one thing," I said. "Obedience for laity is very different from what it is for clergy. With very few exceptions, you can accept or not accept the priest's advice and instructions. For clergy, it is the rarest of circumstances where they can refuse the bishop's instructions."

"Do we have time to play some *Uno*?" Tasha asked, quickly ending the conversation.

"We don't have to leave until about 3:45pm," I said. "So, yes."

We played several games of *Uno*, finishing just before Elizaveta and I had to leave. Mark and Alyssa stayed to have dinner with Nik and Tasha, so Elizaveta and I bid all four of them goodbye and headed for the Country Club for the family dinner.

"You talked to your mom, right?" Elizaveta asked,

"Yes. She said Dad will be fine, and your dad has Paul and Liz seated at the opposite end of the table, so there isn't any obvious tension."

"Do you think your dad will ever come around?"

"I'm hoping when Paul and Liz have their first kid, my dad's heart will soften. You helped reconcile him to Liz on her wedding day, but that's as far as he's come. He simply can't get past the idea that Paul abused Liz."

"Does he think that about us?"

"There are important differences which make his feelings about us nowhere near as severe. He thinks you're too young, and nothing is going to change his mind about that."

"You thought Liz was too young."

"Yes, I did."

"You also thought I was too young!"

"I did. You convinced me otherwise! And remember, there is quite a difference between twenty-four and fourteen and twenty-two and sixteen. And I wasn't married and didn't have a kid."

"But you never stopped loving Liz."

"Neither did my dad. That's why you could get him to come to her wedding. Let me ask you this -- how would your dad have reacted if you had done what Liz did."

"I would never!" Elizaveta protested.

"I didn't say you WOULD, I'm just asking how you think your dad would have reacted."

"It's Gennady the guy would have had to worry about," Elizaveta said soberly. "He would have killed him. Dad would have had him arrested and prosecuted. Iosif wouldn't have cared one way or the other so long as it was what I wanted. Your dad still doesn't know you helped Paul get a job, does he?"

"No. But at this point, it really doesn't matter if he finds out. So long as he comes to the wedding and my ordination, there won't be any real trouble, and he promised to come and not cause a scene with Paul. As I said, I don't expect any changes before Liz has her first baby."

"When?"

"I'd guess in four or five years. We'll probably have our first before she does, but you never know. Things might change for her, and the timing for our kids is really up to you, at least once you graduate High School. We shouldn't even think about having one before then. I've seen the difficulty April and Sasha have had."

"I agree. We'll discuss it once I graduate, OK?"

"OK."

When we arrived at the Country Club, we went to the private dining room where the extended family was beginning to gather. We'd be missing one set of my grandparents as well as Elizaveta's brothers, but all of them would attend the wedding. Viktor and Yulia had already arrived, as had my grandparents. My parents and Elizaveta's grandparents all arrived in the next ten minutes, and Liz and Paul arrived last, just before the scheduled time. We all took our seats, and two waiters quickly served salads while two others took drink orders.

The waiters also brought us each a small glass with about half an ounce of vodka in it. A dinner such as this, in Russian tradition, required three toasts. After

talking to Viktor and my grandfather, we'd agreed to what amounted to half-shots for each drink. We'd do the same at the wedding reception. And, after a brief discussion between Viktor and me that included Elizaveta, despite her being only sixteen and the drinking age twenty-one.

Viktor offered the first toast, which was simply for a happy marriage, healthy children, and long lives. We drank and he asked me to give the blessing, which I did, and everyone began eating. Salads gave way to the main course, and a second toast, this time from my grandfather, which echoed Viktor's original toast. When dessert was served, Elizaveta's paternal grandfather made the third toast. When we finished dessert, some of the men ordered drinks while the rest of us simply had refills of coffee. About three hours after we'd started, the dinner broke up, and Elizaveta and I got into my car to drive to her house.

"Two weeks from today!" she said happily. "And we'll leave here to go to OUR house, husband!"

"It's going to be very busy with studying, final exams, the marriage license, parties, a wedding, and a reception, but it looks like we made it!"

"And then, FINALLY, we can be together!"

"Is that ALL you think about these days?" I asked.

"YES!" she exclaimed.

LXIII. The Final Countdown

May 13, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

The phone rang very early on Monday morning, startling me awake. A quick glance at the clock told me that it had to be Angie calling, and I dreaded answering the phone. Reluctantly, I got out of bed and moved across the room to answer it.

"Mike," I said after I picked up the handset.

"Mike? It's Mom."

"Mom?" I gasped in surprise. "What's wrong?"

"Grandpa Loucks had a heart attack," she said. "Dad is on his way to Chicago."

"How bad?" I asked.

"His prognosis is good, according to your Uncle Rob. Dad felt he had to go, and I agreed."

"Obviously. Are you going up?"

"No. Your dad and I discussed that and given what Rob said, your dad didn't think it was necessary. Once your dad sees your grandfather and talks to the doctors, we'll decide what to do."

"OK," I replied.

"You sound almost relieved," Mom observed.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but given it's just after 2:00am, I was afraid it was Angie."

"I can see why that would concern you."

"I didn't mean any disrespect to Grandpa."

"I know that, Mike. I also know how much you care about Angie and how concerned you are for her. Have you heard anything?"

"No. I'll see Doctor Mercer at the wedding, but everyone has advised me, at least for now, to let Angie's parents, Father Stephen, and the doctors take care of her. It's possible I'm the enemy now, if they didn't take her off the drugs."

"I can't believe that!"

"It's called 'splitting'," I replied. "People are either 'good' or 'evil' and are split into two distinct categories. Think about how Liz reacted four years ago and how she felt about basically everyone except Emmy, Mindy, and me. Either you were on her side, or you were the enemy; there were no grey areas. Anyway, when did Dad leave?"

"About twenty minutes ago. It'll take him about seven hours to get to Naperville."

"I remember it taking less than six the time we went when Liz and I were little."

"Before the federal government forced the speed limits down to 55MPH," Mom said.

"Which has never really affected me because I mostly drive US Highways, not Interstates. Anyway, I hope you don't mind if I go back to bed."

"Not at all. I'll call you when we know more."

"Thanks, Mom."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, distressed that my grandfather had suffered a heart attack but relieved that it hadn't been Angie who had called. I climbed back into bed, glanced at the clock to be sure the alarm was set, then closed my eyes and fell asleep. A few hours later, I was awakened by the alarm, put on my shorts, a T-shirt, and sneakers, and went out for my usual morning run in the crisp morning air.

I truly hoped my grandfather was OK, though I half-jested with myself that he'd found a way to avoid walking into an Orthodox church for the second time in his life -- the first one being my parents' wedding. He'd chosen not to come to either my baptism or Liz's and generally disapproved of my dad's conversion to Orthodoxy. I shuddered at the thought of who I might have become had the situation been reversed and my mom had elected to convert to my dad's fundamentalist evangelicalism.

The Orthodox Church defined so much of who I was that I actually couldn't even imagine not being Orthodox. It was that complete immersion in the church which had led me to where I now was -- about to marry Elizaveta and, in two months, be ordained a deacon. Neither of those were things which I had expected to occur when I'd mapped out my four years of college towards the end of my Senior year at Harding County High.

At that time, I'd been dating April, though I'd seen the cracks developing in the relationship because of church, but the idea of marriage, to anyone, was something I'd figured would be put off until after medical school. And while I

was Head Acolyte at Holy Transfiguration, I hadn't seriously considered the potential of being a subdeacon, let alone a deacon. And I most certainly hadn't imagined the disastrous events of the Summer following graduation, nor that my closest friends would be a lesbian and two gay guys.

The other surprising thing was that I had gone from difficulty in getting dates to girls literally throwing themselves at me. That had been a complete surprise, and I hadn't always handled it very well. I had run on the very edge of being completely out of control but had managed to rein it in, with help from Lara, at what amounted to the 'eleventh hour' with regard to my upcoming ordination. Of course, that request from Lara had been after she and I had gone to bed together and in anticipation of us potentially marrying. That hadn't happened, but her request that I remain chaste had paved the way for my relationship with Elizaveta.

When I got back to the dorm, I showered, dressed, said my prayers, and then met Clarissa, Jocelyn, Gene, Robby, Lee, Sophia, Sandy, Pete, José, Dona, Fran, and Jason for breakfast.

"My mom called very early this morning," I said as we walked towards the cafeteria. "My grandpa on my dad's side had a heart attack last night. Mom said the prognosis is good, but we won't really know anything until my dad gets there in about three hours."

"Just your dad went?" Jocelyn asked.

"Yes. Because my Uncle Rob said the prognosis was good, Mom and Dad decided that just Dad would drive up to Naperville."

"Where's Naperville?" Sandy asked.

"Just west of Chicago."

"Not to be morbid, but..."

"I have no idea. I'm hoping my Uncle Rob was accurate in what he told my dad and that it's minor, at least as far as heart attacks go. He's Dutch Calvinist, and I doubt he's ever had a sip of alcohol in his life, and I know he doesn't smoke. If I remember right, he walks every morning and eats a healthy diet."

"What DO Calvinists do for fun?" Gene asked.

I chuckled, "The Calvinist's greatest fear is that somewhere, somehow, someone is having fun. The Calvinist's mission in life is to put a stop to it immediately!"

Everyone laughed.

"That's like the old joke about why Baptists don't have sex standing up," Sophia said. "They're afraid it might lead to dancing!"

More laughter.

"Your grandfather is like that?" Robby asked.

"The Dutch one. No rock music, no card playing, nor any other thing which might be the tool of Satan. And that includes icons, incense, and vestments. And he has a healthy DISRESPECT for Mary, the Mother of God."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit?" José asked.

"Well, if everyone for all of history, including Luther, thought Mary was a virgin for her entire life, and you say she's not, based on some radical ideas from the 16th century, I'd say that's besmirching her reputation, wouldn't you?"

"If you put any value on virginity, it does!"

"Which they do," I replied. "Just not HERS! Honestly, it's an insult to her and to the Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Luther, Zwingli, and the Anglican Reformers! Calvin specifically cautioned against 'impious speculation', but I think ultimately he rejected the doctrine, at least based on his commentaries."

"How do you know so much about that?" Gene asked.

"In order to become a catechist and teach Sunday School, I had to know the heterodox doctrines. I learned them from Father Herman at my former parish. I also took World Religions, so I have a good grounding in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Greek, Roman, German, and Norse gods. And before you say that Jesus had brothers, the Greek word, at the time of the Septuagint, was used to mean brothers or cousins, which reflected Jewish usage. And Jesus undoubtedly spoke Aramaic which has no distinct word for 'cousin'.

"Then there's the more ancient view, to which we hold, that they were half-siblings from Joseph's previous marriage. This is attested to in the *Protoevangelium of James*, which is not canonical but does provide some evidence of our earliest traditions. I'll point out that the first claim that Mary had children after Jesus didn't come until Helvidius in the 4th century. So yeah, a healthy DISRESPECT for Mary. It's a topic which will cause steam to come from my grandfather's ears, according to my mom."

"Sorry," Sandy interjected, "but what will you do?"

"With finals, my wedding, my honeymoon, and my trip to Europe, I'm not sure what I COULD do. All I can do is pray for my grandfather and hope my uncle is right."

We had our breakfast, then returned to the dorm to get our books. Clarissa, Sandy, and I headed to our Abnormal Psych class.

"Sorry if I was rude before," Sandy said.

"It's OK," I replied. "It was a valid question and one I considered before coming to a conclusion about my grandfather's beliefs."

"Were you worried it was Angie when the phone rang?" Clarissa asked.

I nodded, "I was. I even apologized to my mom for sounding somewhat relieved."

"What do you think Angie will do?"

I shrugged, "I have no idea."

After Abnormal Psych and P-Chem, we headed back to the dorm. There was a note on my corkboard that my mom had called. I quickly went into my room and returned the call.

"Your dad is at Edward Hospital in Naperville and says your grandfather is doing OK and is in reasonably good spirits. They're going to keep him for another day or two, then send him home. He'll need to see a cardiologist, and they'll take it from there. But it seems as if he's not in any serious danger at the moment."

"Good!" I exclaimed.

"Your dad will be home on Wednesday night. He wants to make sure your grandfather gets home, and your grandmother has everything she needs. I think

with your Uncle Rob and Aunt Chris and their spouses and families, everything will be taken care of."

"Can Grandpa receive calls?"

"Your dad gave me the number to your grandfather's room. Let me give it to you."

She read off the number, and I wrote it down.

"Thanks," I said. "Do you think it's OK to call him now?"

"Probably. If he doesn't answer, that means it's not a good time."

"I'll call when we hang up. If you hear anything, please let me know."

"I will. Focus on your finals. You have enough other distractions for the next two weeks!"

"You think?" I chuckled.

"See you on the 26th!"

We said 'goodbye', and after Mom hung up, I pressed the switchhook and dialed the number in the 312 area code. My dad answered, and he handed the phone to my grandfather. My grandfather sounded pretty good, and after we chatted for a few minutes, he gave the phone back to my dad.

"He's going home tomorrow afternoon," Dad said. "I'm staying to make sure he gets home, and your grandmother has all the help she needs. I plan to be home on Wednesday evening."

"OK. Mom said she'd call if anything changed. I'll see you on the 26th."

"I'll be there, Mike. Your grandfather is insisting that he'll be there as well."

"Tell Grandma that I understand if they aren't able to come and to keep Grandpa from doing anything foolish."

Dad laughed, "It doesn't work the same in a Dutch Calvinist family as it does in a Russian Orthodox one!"

"Tell Grandma what I said and that the situation makes her an honorary «бабушка» (*babushka*)!"

Dad laughed again, "Thanks for helping me laugh. I'll tell her. It should be good for another laugh."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up, then joined the gang for lunch. After lunch, we headed back to the dorms and checked our mailboxes as we usually did.

"I got it!" José exclaimed waving a paper in the air.

"Congratulations!" I replied, and our other friends echoed that sentiment.

"A private shower is the best benefit of being RA!" Gene said.

"Of COURSE you think so!" Jocelyn teased.

"I didn't mean for THAT!" he laughed. "Did you see how small the shower is? I meant for not having to wait for a turn or time things just in case all the showers are busy when you're in a hurry."

"And you CAN squeeze in there!" Sandy teased.

"Maybe if you're a runner like Mike," Gene laughed, shaking his head. "And your girlfriend was tiny, like Lara or Kimiko."

He was stocky, not fat, but also not built like a football player.

"Now, wait just a minute!" Jocelyn objected, putting her hands on her hips.

"I wasn't saying you were fat!" Gene said defensively.

"Relax, Jos," I chuckled. "You have very nice curves!"

"Watch it, Mik!"

"What?" I asked innocently. "You DO have very nice curves!"

"He's right," Clarissa smirked, licking her lips.

Jocelyn rolled her eyes, and we went upstairs to get our books so we could head to our afternoon classes.



May 14, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Tuesday morning, I worked on my final paper for Abnormal Psych until the Post Office and BMV opened, then drove over to change my license and registration at the BMV and my address at the Post Office. Fortunately, the lines were short, and I was able to accomplish both in a relatively short amount of time. I returned to campus to put the finishing touches on my paper and had just put my pencil down when the phone rang.

"Mike Loucks," I said when I answered.

"Mike, it's Dad."

"Hi! How's Grandpa?"

"Ready to go home. He really dislikes being in the hospital."

"No doubt," I replied. "I heard just how horrible it was from Jocelyn. Is he still going home this afternoon?"

"Yes. I did tell your grandmother what you said, and she laughed. Then, later, she told your grandfather he was going to follow the cardiologist's instructions to the letter, and she was going to make sure he did. She sounded just like you would expect Grandma Borodin to sound in similar circumstances."

"Good!" I chuckled. "It's never too late to learn to be a «бабушка» (*babushka*)!"

"Your grandfather objected, and then your grandmother made me laugh when she told him, and I'm quoting now, 'Our grandson, the doctor, gave me specific instructions!'"

"Not even close!" I chuckled. "That's four years from now, at least!"

"You know grandparents like to exaggerate! Your mom's dad does that all the time when he talks about you!"

"True," I agreed with a silly smile my dad couldn't see.

"Everything looks to be going the way we expected, so I plan on driving home tomorrow afternoon. If anything comes up, either Mom or I will call you."

"Thanks, Dad. Tell Grandpa I'm glad he's going home."

"Not half as glad as he is!"

"Until Grandma lays down the law," I chuckled.

"That will be interesting to watch, at long-distance, like with an A-bomb test!"

We both laughed, then said 'goodbye' and hung up.

I finished editing my paper, checked my watch, and decided I had enough time to go to the computer lab and create the final copy I would hand in. I did that and returned to the dorm just in time to join the gang for lunch. Clarissa came by to get me and stepped into my room.

"Done?" she asked.

"Yeah. It was way more work than I'd intended to have to put into this class, but it was worth it."

"Did you keep your conclusion intact?"

"That mental healthcare sucks? Yes, though I used proper language -- inefficient, ineffective, indifferent, and often incoherent. All of which is caused, at least in part, by the stigma of mental illness and the public perception that the mentally ill are somehow less human than the rest of us. But as we know, it's only a matter of degree that changes quirky behavior into mental illness. We call people like that 'eccentric' until they cross some invisible line, and then we want to drug them or lock them up.

"Locking them up actually used to be the policy, as we talked about, until the ACLU won their case in 1975. The problem was, once the 'right to liberty'

basically outlawed institutionalization for anyone who wasn't a danger to themselves or the community, nothing effective was put in place to replace it. And the stigma I mentioned prevented proper integration of people like Angie into the community. Drugs became the treatment of choice because they made it easier for everyone. Well, everyone except someone like Angie."

"So you think they should just take her off the drugs?"

I sighed, "Heck if I know, but what I did conclude is that until we change the public perception of mental illness and stop relying on drugs as the primary treatment, we're never going to have a system which isn't inefficient, ineffective, indifferent, and often incoherent. I don't know how to fix Angie's illness, and I'm not planning on being a psychiatrist, so someone else has to work on that. But that someone HAS to be focused on a combination of education and treatment.

"I relate this to the 'hand washing' history we learned about. It was only after doctors were properly educated that the majority began following the guidelines. But as we also know, there are doctors today who don't follow those guidelines, even though they've now been scientifically demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt. And while true science never takes anything completely off the table, I'd say the 'germ theory' of disease is pretty well secured against any possible alternative hypotheses.

"So what we need, as I wrote in my paper, is a strong public education effort, along with new and better research into the genetic, social, and environmental causes of mental illness, and ways to treat them which do not involve psychoactive drugs except in the most extreme cases. We also need a strong effort to prevent mental illness where it is preventable. And to de-stigmatize treatment so people will seek it when necessary."

Clarissa smiled, "You almost sound like a professor!"

"You do realize that in five years, WE will be teaching medical students! I read the information McKinley Medical School provided on Sub-Internships, Clerkships, and clinical rotations. We'll be supervised by Residents, some of them first year!"

"God help us AND them!" Clarissa replied, shaking her head.

"No kidding. Let's go have some lunch."

We left for the cafeteria, where we sat at our usual table with the gang, then headed back to the dorm. I was slowly moving things from the dorm to the cottage, and Clarissa, Jocelyn, Robby, and Lee helped me carry things down to my Mustang so I could leave them in my new home on my way to the appointment with the clerk to get the marriage license. When we came back upstairs, Kimiko was waiting.

"Do you have a minute?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Come to my room, please?"

Clarissa and Jocelyn smirked, but they both knew that nothing was going to happen. Even if I weren't engaged, Kimiko and Brandon were very close, and it appeared that he might even return to Japan with her when she graduated. I followed her down the hall to her room. She unlocked the door, and we went into the common area, leaving the door wide open behind us.

"I have a small gift for you," she said. "Well, two, actually. I wanted to give one of them in private. I'll give the other at your wedding reception."

"I appreciate the thought," I replied.

She unlocked the door to her room and came out with a package wrapped in white paper covered with images of cherry blossoms. She handed it to me, and when I opened it, I couldn't help but laugh. It was a small print of *Octopus and shell diver*. For Kimiko, that was an extremely risqué gift, given her natural conservatism, but one which acknowledged our relationship. The print could only be displayed someplace very private, which meant my bedroom in the cottage. I wondered how Elizaveta would react to THAT.

"I wanted you to have a nice print of the image instead of the poster."

"Thank you," I said.

"Our relationship was beautiful, but the cultural gulf was too wide," she said with a soft smile. "I have no regrets, Maikeru-san."

"Nor, I, Kimiko-chan."

"I will never forget you," she said quietly.

"Nor I, you."

"Is it appropriate to hug?" she asked.

"If Brandon won't object."

She smiled, "He won't."

We exchanged a hug, she kissed my cheek, and then we went back to my room to hang out with our friends. I carefully put the print in the desk drawer without allowing anyone to see it, as I wanted to protect Kimiko's privacy and reputation.

We hung out for a few hours with people coming and going based on their class schedules, and then at 2:45pm, I left for Elizaveta's house. I greeted Yulia, then carried the boxes and bags I had to the cottage and stashed them in the smaller bedroom as per Elizaveta's instructions. Once I finished, I waited for Elizaveta to arrive home, and after she put her books in her room, we waited for Viktor, who was at work. Once he arrived, the four of us got into his Lincoln Continental to head to the Hayes County Courthouse.

At the courthouse, I filled out the application for a marriage license, and then we had to wait for about twenty minutes for the County Clerk to be available. Once she was, we were ushered into her office.

"Miss Kozlov, you're sixteen?" the Clerk asked.

"Yes."

"And these are your parents?"

"Yes."

"Do you have your notarized parental permission form?"

"I do," she said, handing it over. "Along with the required notarized minister's statement."

"Thank you. I'll need to see a photo ID from all four of you, please."

Each of us handed over our driving licenses, and the Clerk, Mrs. Nixon, compared our names and photos with all the documentation.

"Thank you. This is all in order. Do you have your blood test results?"

Elizaveta and I both handed those to the clerk, who reviewed them and set them aside with the notarized documents.

"Miss Kozlov, Mister Loucks, if you would sign the application, please."

We both did, and she stamped it with her official seal.

"Thank you. You can take this to the cashier, pay the fee, and they'll issue your license. It's valid for sixty days. After that point, you would need to re-apply."

"Thank you," Elizaveta and I both said.

"We'll want to get a certified copy of the marriage certificate on the Monday following our wedding," I said. "We'll be going to Europe, and we don't want any trouble."

"Simply come to the office with the license signed by the minister following the ceremony, and we can issue you one."

"Thank you," I said.

The four of us got up and went out to the cashier, where I paid the \$25 fee. Ten minutes later, we had a marriage license, and suddenly, it hit me that I really WAS getting married in twelve days! I'd known that intellectually, but somehow, holding a piece of paper in my hands drove home the gravity of what was happening in less than two weeks.

"Is everything OK, Mike?" Elizaveta asked.

I chuckled and nodded, "This piece of paper carries some pretty heavy implications, which just became far more real than they were ten minutes ago!"

Viktor laughed, "If you think it hit you NOW, just wait until you're standing in front of the table with the bishop a week from Sunday!"

"If you aren't careful, I will hit YOU, Vitya!" Yulia said forcefully.

He laughed again, "My wife knows I was about to turn and run! But I also knew it would do no good as she would have simply hunted me down and dragged me back!"

"And if you tell this silly story just one more time..." she said menacingly but with a silly smile.

"Mike would NEVER run away," Elizaveta declared emphatically.

"For the same reason your dad didn't!" I teased.

"You!" she exclaimed and smacked my arm.

"What?" I asked with feigned innocence. "I was simply acknowledging that you would hold me to my commitment!"

"Don't worry, Liza," Yulia said, "like all Russian men, he is afraid of Russian women! As well he SHOULD be!"

"Not just Russian men," I chuckled. "The Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Lebanese, and Syrian men, too! They didn't need the Women's Liberation Movement to change the dynamic! Orthodox women have been in charge from the beginning!"

"Which is why the old men all drink heavily!" Viktor said with a wink, which was followed by outraged squeals from his wife and daughter.

"So I've noticed," I agreed with a grin.

"Michael!" Elizaveta said sternly.

"Yes, «Зайчик» (*zaychuk*)?" I asked, purposefully calling her 'bunny rabbit' instead of 'Kitten' to tease her.

"Hmph!" she grunted.

"Forget it, dear," Yulia said. "The men are in a mood right now! This is when you send them out to drink vodka and smoke cigars so they can commiserate about their terrible lives with their beautiful, loving, supportive wives!"

That earned me the other 'look' from Elizaveta -- the scowl of extreme disapproval.

"We'll just see about that!" she declared.

"How about we all go out for a nice steak dinner," Viktor offered.

The other three of us quickly agreed, and that was, thankfully, the end of the silly jesting for the day.



May 16, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Ten days to go!" Clarissa said when she came into my room before breakfast on Thursday morning.

"Why do you sound like you're counting down the days to my execution?" I asked.

Clarissa laughed, "Because it's fun to tease you! You know that! Did your dad get home OK last night?"

"He did. Mom called right before I turned in for the night. Grandpa's home with a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet, along with a light exercise regimen until he has another evaluation by the cardiologist on Monday. The heart attack was really mild. He was at his Sunday night men's Bible study and felt pressure in his chest. His friends insisted he go to the hospital."

"Smart."

"Absolutely. That's not something to fool around with."

"I never asked; how old is he?"

"He'll be seventy-one in about a month. My grandma is about four years younger."

"Doing some quick math, he got married right out of college, and she had just graduated High School."

"Exactly. They had dated from the time she was fifteen. Well, 'courted' is more like it. My great-grandparents were apparently from the Deacon Vasily school of teen relationships. According to the family stories, every single date was chaperoned, and they got engaged when she was a Junior."

"Hmm," Clarissa smirked. "Now, where have I heard a similar story?"

"I was allowed to take both Tasha and Elizaveta on private dates!"

"True, so a slight let-up on the reins. Well, unless your name is Sasha!"

"She had her mind made up, and nobody was going to change it," I replied. "So did Tasha, for that matter, but she extracted the promise from me because she was so conflicted about the Church's teaching and the demands her hormones were making!"

"So, same as you!"

I nodded, "Yes. And I'm sure you know what I'm about to say."

"That if Deacon Vasily had allowed you and Tasha to date properly, he would have achieved his goal of marrying his virginal daughter to a faithful young man."

"Pretty much. His restrictions actually worked counter to his purposes."

"And even with them, you got to sample her tremendous charms on multiple occasions!"

"Again, something which very likely would not have happened because we'd have been betrothed by then. Well, we might have gone to bed together once we were engaged, but it wouldn't have been the torrid affair which it turned out to be."

"What's the line from *Star Wars*?"

"The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers."

"Which is what happened in Maggie's situation as well. I think there are some valuable parenting lessons there."

"Add Liz to that list," I replied. "Though once she decided to be with Paul, her relationship with my dad was always going to go straight to Hell, even without my parents' 'positive control' of her life. I was pretty sure my mom would eventually come around the way she did, but my dad is behaving exactly as I feared and expected."

"You two seem to be getting along better."

"Call it a thin veneer of civility over some fairly strong disagreements about a wide range of things. But, I'm willing to overlook all of that for a good relationship and just let God's energies and His outpouring of love work on my dad."

"You've distanced yourself from your parents."

I nodded, "And appropriately so, I think. Don't you?"

"Taking everything into consideration, yes. Shall we go to breakfast?"

I nodded, "The only thing in the room that's good to eat right now is YOU, and my diet doesn't permit that!"

Clarissa laughed, "You are such a goofball! Come on!"

We left my room and headed to the cafeteria for breakfast. Once we'd finished eating, Clarissa and I went to Doctor Blahnik's house so I could practice the balalaika. I'd worked hard to get *Lara's Theme* as close to perfect as I could, and Clarissa was effusive in her compliments.

"If I give this to you next week, will you bring it to the reception? I don't want anyone to see it until the very last moment."

"Sure. I'll stash it at Abby's place, and we'll put it in the trunk of her car. I can duck out right before you and Elizaveta sing your song and stay in the back of the room until you're ready for it."

"Thanks. That's about the last thing I need to arrange. The only stuff left in my room are some clothes for the next ten days, my books for this semester, the CD player, the stereo, and a dozen albums. Well, and maybe a dozen bottles of pop."

"Did José ask you about the fridge?"

"Yes. I already agreed to leave it for him. He'll stash it at Doctor Blahnik's house for the Summer with her blessing. Is everything set with Abby?"

"I took a bunch of my stuff there on Tuesday while the warden was preparing the execution order!"

I chuckled, "I dare you to say that to Elizaveta!"

"Then it would be MY execution!" Clarissa laughed. "I do need to buy a car once we come back from Europe to make it easier to get around."

"Talk to Viktor. The Ford dealership sells used cars. How are you paying for it?"

"Mom and Dad told me they're giving me a cash gift for graduation."

"I guess that means they've come to terms with you moving in with Abby."

"To a point. I think that deep down, they hope this is just a phase. They're wrong, of course. But if that little fantasy keeps the peace, I'm OK with it. Is there anything you need my help with?"

"Not that I can think of right now," I replied. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"A nice long hug?"

I held out my arms, and she melted into them. I held her for a good ten minutes, after which she gave me a quick peck on the cheek. I put the balalaika away, and then the two of us headed back to campus. We ate lunch with the gang, then, as we only had two finals, spent the afternoon helping the underclassmen on our floor prepare for their upcoming exams.

After dinner, Clarissa, Sandy, and I hung out in my room.

"It's kind of weird not having to study," Sandy observed.

"Take this blessing while you can!" I said. "August is only three months away!"

"Ugh!" Sandy grouched. "Don't remind me! We have one last Summer to have fun!"

"Our Europe trip is only three weeks away!" Clarissa declared. "What are you doing between the wedding and our trip?"

"Pete and I are going to French Lick, Indiana, for a week to get away from school, the parents, and everything!"

"De-stressing?" I asked.

"The last thing I want to do is get on a plane for Europe stressed out! I'll just have Pete provide non-stop stress relief for six days!"

"I think that might leave HIM stressed!" I chuckled.

Sandy laughed, "True. And we'll do some of that, but mostly it's just a chance to totally get away from everything for a solid week. No school; no parents; no nothing except relaxation. Clarissa, what are you and Abby doing while Mike actually IS having non-stop sex?"

Clarissa and I both laughed.

"Not much," Clarissa replied. "Abby has to work because she's using every bit of her saved vacation for the trip. I'm actually going to hang out with Mark and Alyssa. Tasha will be working, and everyone else is bugging out by noon on Monday."

"You know," Sandy said, "I never asked, but do you guys do a rehearsal dinner?"

I shook my head, "No, because there really is nothing to rehearse. The ceremony is fairly simple, and for the most part, Elizaveta and I just stand there. We walk around the table, but Bishop ARKADY will lead us. There's no procession or anything like you would see in a Western church. We don't use a wedding march or anything like it. There will be a reception at the church following, but it's basically coffee, punch, and cookies. We couldn't invite the entire parish to the Country Club, so Elizaveta and I will stay about an hour before we head to the Country Club."

"Are you going to have any energy left?" Sandy asked with a smirk.

"Let's see," Clarissa teased, "a sexy, naked sixteen-year-old girl begging him to fuck her brains out. What do YOU think?"

Sandy laughed, "I think he'll be 'up' for it!"

Clarissa and I started laughing, but our laughter was interrupted by the telephone. I got up to answer it.

"Mike Loucks."

"Subdeacon? It's Father Stephen."

"Good afternoon, Father," I replied.

"Good afternoon. I'm calling about Angie."

My heart sank because I was sure she was back in the hospital.

"What happened?" I asked warily.

"Actually, last night she spoke to me about coming to your wedding. She seemed perfectly lucid to me and was logical and calm."

"What did Doctor Mercer say?" I asked, relieved.

"I believe she's going to call you this evening to get your opinion."

"What is your opinion, Father?"

"From a spiritual standpoint, I see the advantage of her coming to the wedding ceremony, though I would strongly advise against her coming to the reception. I think that would overstimulate her."

"Is that your advice?"

"After consulting with Father Nicholas and speaking with Vladyka ARKADY, it's Vladyka's opinion we should allow her to come to the wedding if her doctors agree."

"So it really hinges on my discussion with Doctor Mercer then. I suppose my question for you is how hard should I fight for Angie to be able to come to the wedding ceremony."

"It's my opinion she should be there. I think it will give her closure. It might cause some short-term pain, but in the long run, seeing you marry will help her move on. But you know that's a layman's opinion with regard to her mental health."

"Which is why we're all torn," I replied. "What's good for her spiritually might harm her mental health, which in turn could harm her spiritual health. Do you know what's going on with her medication?"

"She's on much lower dosages of both the antipsychotic and antidepressant, but she's still taking both."

"And you said she seems, well, normal, for lack of a better word."

"Very much like her old self, yes."

"And she's not angry with me?"

"Why would she be?" Father Stephen asked.

"Because they still have her on the drugs," I replied.

"I think the lowered dosages were enough for her. You know the complaints she had."

"I do. Those drugs are horrible and have terrible side effects if they're used long-term. But we know what happens when she's completely off them, and that's

driven by the fact she'll likely never have the one thing she wants more than anything -- children of her own."

"Doctor Mercer has been working with her on that, and so have I, but it's difficult."

"I can't even begin to imagine," I replied. "Do you know if she's working?"

"Not yet, but the goal is for her to go back right after the Fourth of July."

"Good. Well, I'll talk to Doctor Mercer in a bit. Do you want me to call you back?"

"No. I'll talk to Doctor Mercer when she calls."

"Thanks for calling, Father. I'll see you a week from Sunday."

"You're welcome, Subdeacon."

We said 'goodbye', and I hung up.

"Well?" Clarissa asked.

"She's doing OK, and wants to come to the wedding. The bishop thinks it would be good for her spiritually. Doctor Mercer is concerned, and so am I."

"But damned if you do and damned if you don't, right?"

I nodded, "I think so, yes. That's why I'm leaning towards saying she should be at the wedding ceremony. Not allowing her will absolutely cause her to lose it. Allowing her might work out OK. So, given the choice between guaranteed failure and some chance of success, I'll take the risk. But in the end, it's up to Doctor Mercer and Angie's parents."

"You don't think she'll cause a scene, do you?"

I shook my head, "I don't think so; not in the church, anyway. But I should call Elizaveta and let her know before I talk to Doctor Mercer."

"Good choice, Petrovich!" Clarissa declared.

I called Elizaveta and explained what I'd discussed with Father Stephen. She was sympathetic and agreed it was OK to invite Angie to the wedding. I thanked her, told her I loved her, and then we hung up.

A couple of hours later, after dinner, the phone rang, and I answered it, assuming correctly it was Doctor Mercer calling.

"The bottom line," I said, after we'd talked for several minutes, "is that the bishop thinks it will be spiritually healthy for Angie, and I tend to agree. Ultimately, I think denying her will create an impossible situation that can never be resolved. Allowing her to come, even if it goes wrong, can be fixed."

"That's an interesting point of view," Doctor Mercer replied. "It's one that Doctor Paulus said I should consider because a mistake in not letting her attend can't be resolved, as you say. I do understand that argument, but I think there are major risks either way."

"Yes, there are," I replied. "But I trust Angie not to make a scene in church. What happens after that, I can't promise. But I do know if you refuse her, it's going to go terribly wrong, and she'll end up back in the hospital in restraints and heavily drugged. That's a guarantee in my mind. That might well happen if you let her come to the wedding, but it might not. And THAT is why I think you should advise her parents to bring her to the wedding ceremony. She'd be at the church less than an hour, and then they'd take her home."

"I'll share something with you," Doctor Mercer said. "Agreeing to this will put me at complete odds with her psychiatrist."

"Then get her a new psychiatrist," I replied testily. "I finished my research paper, and to say that I'm appalled is an understatement. Let me ask you this -- what did Doctor Hoffman say?"

"She's not involved because Angie isn't in the hospital."

"Find someone whose first response isn't drugs, please. I'm not saying take her off them without proper consideration, but drugs are a crutch -- not for the patient, but for the psychiatrist!"

"I really do want to see that paper," Doctor Mercer replied. "Has it been graded?"

"No. I'll turn it in tomorrow. I'll have a copy of both papers for you when you come to McKinley for the wedding rather than mail them. And please, for me, convince Angie's parents to allow her to attend the wedding."

"Let me think on it overnight and consult with Doctor Paulus."

"Thanks, Doctor Mercer. See you a week from Sunday."

We said 'goodbye' and I hung up, hopeful that she'd accede to Angie's request.

LXIV. It's A Wrap!

May 17, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Last Day!" Clarissa exclaimed when she came to my room on Friday morning before breakfast.

"If you think I'm going to 'Carrousel' because my life clock has gone red eight years early, Jessica 6, you're nuts!" I declared.

"I thought that was a foregone conclusion, Logan 5!"

"Well, yeah!" I chuckled. "You're my friend, so that does call your sanity into question!"

"Can you believe it's been four years?"

"No. There never really was a time when it felt like the days were dragging by, and looking back, it seems as if time has flown by!"

"So true. Shall we get breakfast? The entire gang is assembling, even the lazy bums who don't have their first class until 11:00am!"

We left my room to head to the cafeteria.

"Some people are in love with sleep," I replied. "Something we future doctors know is silly!"

"Have you always been a morning person?"

"Pretty much. It gave me more hours in the day when I had an early curfew or early bedtime, or there were evening church services. When I was living at home, I'd get the newspaper and do the chess puzzle before breakfast. It was a good way to start the day."

"How exciting!" Clarissa declared sarcastically.

"Well, sex wasn't really an option as a teenager!" I chuckled.

"Nor for the last ten months or so, either!"

"The difference was in High School, it was for lack of opportunity!"

"Nobody really hit on you once you started seeing Elizaveta regularly."

"No, but it was fairly obvious which girls would have been more than happy to keep me warm at night if I wanted."

"Including a certain professor!" Clarissa teased.

"That was a warm bath and glass of white wine!"

"I have to say that is the one thing I'm sorry didn't happen. I would have LOVED the conversation with you the day after!"

"What? Nuclear annihilation?" I asked with a smirk, referencing a TV show from a few years earlier.

"The reactions to that movie in the dorm were interesting."

"The network forced the producers of *The Day After* to cut the most graphic stuff," I replied. "All because the network censors were afraid people might be

disturbed! Well, Golly Gee Wilikers, maybe people SHOULD be disturbed by the thought of nuclear war! I'm not about to surrender to the Soviets, but nuclear war would have exactly zero winners and effectively infinite losers! Sadly, we can't un-invent the things."

"So, no *Red Dawn* for you? Got it!" Clarissa replied with a laugh. "But that's the most political thing I think I've heard you say."

"What politics?" I asked. "The idea of a 'winnable' nuclear war is the very definition of insanity, and anyone who thinks that a nuclear war could be 'won' needs to be locked up in an asylum! In fact, that's a good way for us to safely use up the supply of psychoactive drugs! Maybe, just maybe, something will come of President Reagan's START proposal, and we can start putting the «djinn» back in the bottle! Sadly, it'll never go all the way back in, but any nuclear weapon taken out of service is a win for the world. And now I've said my piece. Let's go in and eat!"

We joined the extended gang for breakfast, spreading out across a second table from our usual one. Given exam schedules, this was probably the last time we'd all eat together as students. It was bittersweet but necessary, as it was time to continue to the next stage of our journey. The person I was going to miss the most was Clark, and I hoped he was going to be both happy and successful in Chicago.

"We set a date," Fran announced. "Well, my mom did, anyway!"

"And you're eloping to Vegas the week before?" Sandy asked.

"We should," Fran said, shaking her head. "But no. July 27th."

"Where?"

"Wapakoneta. I did talk her out of a minister, so we'll just have a judge do the ceremony. The reception is at a park. And it's casual."

"Sounds like you did some serious negotiating!" Sophia said.

"More like threatening to do exactly what Sandy suggested!"

"The timing will be tricky for Elizaveta and me," I said. "My ordination is that Sunday, and we absolutely have to be at Vespers."

"The wedding is at noon, and we'll understand if you can't stay for the entire reception. We plan to come to your ordination. We'll leave for Vancouver on Monday."

"Pete, did you guys find an apartment?" Clark asked.

"Last weekend," he said. "It's in that complex just south of the hospital. We figured it was better to be closer to the medical school than to Taft. We'll move in when we come back from Europe."

When we finished breakfast, we all headed back to the dorms, and Clarissa, Sandy, and I gathered our books for our last day of classes at William Howard Taft. In our Abnormal Psych class, we handed in our papers, filled out a course evaluation, and then were dismissed early. We took the opportunity to have coffee in the Student Union, then headed to our Physical chemistry class, where we had our last in-class review before the comprehensive final exam we'd take on Monday afternoon.

We had lunch with a smaller group, then headed to our stats class, which was another review session for a comprehensive exam we'd take on Tuesday morning, and then ended our four years of classes at Taft in Doctor Blahnik's classroom for Russian Literature. We handed in our papers and had a lively

discussion about the themes and philosophies of the Russian authors we'd studied, and then at 2:50pm on May 17th, we left the classroom having completed our undergraduate studies. All that remained were two exams, and then it was on to graduation.

"Mike? Clarissa?" Doctor Blahnik called out from behind us.

We turned and walked back to her.

"If you two aren't doing anything tonight, come to the house for dinner. Bring Elizaveta and Abby."

"We had planned to go out tonight," I said. "But I think dinner at your house sounds wonderful. The only caveat is that we were having dinner with Mark and Alyssa."

"They're welcome, if that doesn't mess up your plans."

"It doesn't," I replied. "Lissa?"

"We'd love to!"

"Then I'll see you later. Dinner is at 7:00pm; arrive any time after 5:30pm."

"Thanks, Doctor Blahnik," I replied.

"You're welcome!"

We turned around and walked back to where Sandy was waiting for us.

"Teacher's pets!" she teased.

"Don't look at me!" Clarissa exclaimed. "I was just along for the ride! Mike is Doctor Blahnik's pet student!"

"I'm not even in the music department," I protested.

"That didn't seem to matter for her!" Sandy said. "Not to mention her REAL desire!"

I chuckled, "Elizaveta made sure that didn't happen!"

"As did your promise to Lara!" Clarissa replied.

"Yes, but that was only intended to be in force until we figured it out. And given her concerns about living under a microscope as the wife of a deacon, it probably could have worked out in Doctor Blahnik's favor."

"Talk about a complete change! When I first met you, even the *idea* that Doctor Blahnik was interested would have freaked you out! Now you're implying you would have done it!"

"He's not implying anything!" Sandy declared. "He's saying he would have banged her like a drum!"

"No, I'd have enjoyed a nice warm bath, a glass of wine, and some very enjoyable lovemaking," I replied.

"Uh-huh!" Sandy smirked.

"You were quite clear which YOU preferred!" Clarissa declared with a smirk. "Not everyone likes the same thing!"

"Oh, shut up!" Sandy ordered, but she was laughing.

Kristin had liked slow dances; Sandy, on the other hand, had usually preferred 'stress relief', which was anything but a slow dance!

"Are you going to get Elizaveta right away?" Clarissa asked.

"No. I planned to pick her up at 5:30pm, so I'll just stick with that. Music?"

"Absolutely!"

"I'll leave you two to the music," Sandy announced. "I'm going to go find Pete so we can get an early start on the weekend!"

When we arrived back at the dorm, Clarissa put her books in her room while I called Mark to let him know that he and Alyssa should meet us at Doctor Blahnik's house. Clarissa came in just as I hung up and sat down on the couch. I put on *Brothers in Arms* by Dire Straits, then sat down next to Clarissa. She moved very close, so our knees, hips, and shoulders touched, the closest we could come to cuddling without crossing any lines which might upset Elizaveta.

"Any idea why the short notice on dinner?" Clarissa asked.

I shrugged, "No, but you know Doctor Blahnik. She can be fairly spontaneous."

"May I ask a completely inappropriate question?"

"Right, because you've never done THAT before without asking!"

"The rules have changed."

I shook my head, "No, they haven't, with the exception of whatever privacy Elizaveta needs."

"Do you regret not waiting until after school is out to get engaged?"

"As enticing as that might be, I'm not sure there's any way it could have ever happened. Without the chastity pledge, I'd have ended up disqualifying myself from ordination, and I'd have missed out on finding the girl who is my perfect 'partner in crime', given you had to take yourself off the table."

"I thought you didn't want to be a deacon!"

"But the bishop wants me to, and I would have failed him if I couldn't get that part of my life under control. Lara was instrumental in that, and I owe her a debt of gratitude on behalf of the bishop, Father Nicholas, my grandfather, the Parish Council, and myself."

"And Elizaveta!"

"I thought that went without saying from the 'partner in crime' comment!"

"And it wasn't the table I took myself from!" Clarissa said. "It was the bed. I just couldn't."

"I know, and I understand. We both knew that was the likely outcome of our experiment. And I'm glad we did because it ensures no regrets and no 'what might have beens'."

"I was afraid, at least for a time, that I had hurt you."

I smiled, "We love each other far too much for that to have happened! We talked about it at length and took each step in a considered way. Now, if you asked me if I hoped it might turn out differently, the answer is 'yes', and I believe that would be your answer as well."

"It would."

"And yet, you absolutely had to be true to yourself. Anything else would have ended in disaster. So, here we are, best friends, colleagues, and former lovers with a special, lifelong bond. To me, that is the best outcome we could have *reasonably* hoped for."

"Setting aside what was pure fantasy, the way you did with Tasha?"

I chuckled, "I believe I actually lived that fantasy for several months! And I VERY much enjoyed it!"

"Between you and me and invoking my 'Lissa' privilege, was she the best?"

I was about to contradict myself because, on further thinking about it, I had been wrong about Jocelyn, though I wouldn't change what I'd told her. There was something very special about Jocelyn because she was first, and because of 'Mik and Jos', but one person transcended Jocelyn.

I shook my head, "No. That was you, Lissa, because of what it meant and what we mean to each other. Tasha and I love each other, but not the same way I love you, and neither of those is the same as I love and will love Elizaveta."

"But come on, the sex between us wasn't THAT good!"

"Emotionally, it sure was," I countered. "And in the end, that's what really counts. It's not about the number of orgasms or how pleasurable those orgasms are. Sure, I like them, but in the end, it's the closeness that matters more than anything."

"Your feminine side coming through again?"

"If you want to call it that, yes. Do you remember what I said when Dean Parker resigned, and you teased me about being a pig but then teased me about a fivesome with Teri, Melody, Jeannette, and Marie?"

"That the 'time of your life' would be if you and I made love," she replied quietly. "And that even if you and I could only do it once, it would be worth more than a month with the five of them."

"Q.E.D."

"So, most physically pleasurable, then?"

"Tasha. Hands down. No contest! Though I expect to surpass that in about a week!"

Clarissa laughed, "I would hope so! So, where would you put Milena?"

"In the same category as you and Jocelyn, though you still win easily."

"You have no idea how much I love you, Petrovich!"

"I think I do," I replied. "I'm the one man you could make love with. And you know how much I love you."

"I do."

"And everything is going exactly according to plan. We're going to medical school together, which is the next step on the path."

"So, besides Tasha?" Clarissa asked.

I chuckled, "You want a complete system of ratings?"

She laughed, "I'll stop with second place on the pure physical pleasure scale."

"I'm going to have to go with Kimiko because she was so focused on giving me maximum pleasure."

"The dutiful Japanese girl who lived purely to please you?"

"Something like that. I'd really prefer we didn't keep going down this path. I don't particularly like comparing, and I only did it for you."

"Sorry. I probably shouldn't have asked, but I was extremely curious."

"And for you, I answered; I wouldn't do that for anyone else, and I really do try to avoid thinking that way. It could only ever hurt someone."

"Elizaveta?"

I chuckled, "While she may be concerned about living up to some imaginary standard, I would say she has absolutely nothing to worry about in that regard!"

Clarissa laughed, "But the question remains -- who is going to fuck whom senseless?"

"Either way works for me!" I said with a huge grin.

"It's been close to a year, now that I think about it, hasn't it?"

"Just under a year. I made the promise to Lara on July 6th of last year. The Sunday I get married will be about five weeks short of a year."

"It really hasn't affected you in any way I can discern."

I shrugged, "Once I'd made the promise, real temptation basically dried up. Sure, there were offers, but not the way things were before. Everyone knew Lara and I were a couple, and it was only about a month after we decided it wasn't going to work that I asked Elizaveta to marry me. The girls backed off because of Lara, and it just stayed that way."

"You're blaming the girls for your rampage?" Clarissa asked with an arched eyebrow.

I laughed, "No way! You know I didn't usually seek out sex, but I had a very difficult time saying 'no' to girls who made themselves available, with a few exceptions."

"Those Jezebels!" Clarissa teased.

"Yes, but who took them up on their offer? Me! I was in complete control! Well, I wasn't, but you know what I mean!"

"That you are responsible for your own actions, no matter what anyone else does, but that you were VERY weak when it comes to an offer of sex! That seems to be a common thread with guys. That said, you were very good at keeping your word to Tasha, even when she tried to release you from your promise."

"We had to grow up to do what we did," I replied. "Any sooner, and both of us would have believed it required us to get married, even if that wasn't the right thing for the two of us."

"And it let you figure things out with Lara without any drama, too."

"Yes. The only real drama was being browbeaten by a certain very determined fifteen-year-old!"

"Poor baby! 'Coërced' into marrying a gorgeous Orthodox girl who wants to be his wife, can handle being the wife of a deacon, wants to be a doctor's wife, and is probably dripping in anticipation of having him fuck her silly in just over a week!"

"I wasn't complaining! I was simply acknowledging that I was being a blockhead, which she had to overcome."

"No more Russian?"

"Rarely," I said. "I'm reasonably sure that was all part of my infatuation and lust for Tasha. Before she hit puberty, I had really cut down on how much Russian I used. I'd learned when I was little and spoke to my grandparents and my mom, but then once I was in school full time, I stopped using it for the most part. About the time I noticed that Tasha had developed into a gorgeous young woman, I started using more Russian. It wasn't conscious, but I'm sure she's the reason. Liz was right in that regard."

"Elizaveta and I talked about it, and we don't plan to teach our kids Russian, though we wouldn't interfere if our grandparents chose to do that. But having spoken with all of them, I think they're all on the same basic page that I am -- we're Americans at this point. That means we keep some of our ethnic traditions, but we speak English, which, if you think about it, is what my mom's parents did. Tasha's family was something of an anomaly, though ROCOR has families like that who long to return to Russia and might, once they see off the Communists."

"You think that'll happen?"

"I think the Church will outlive the government, yes. If Stalin couldn't destroy the Russian Orthodox Church, nobody could. Even he worried about the grandmas!"

"Wow! You didn't even use the Russian there!"

"I will, occasionally, for effect, but no, I didn't. Mike and Elizaveta Loucks are Americans. Period."

"Your sister must be jumping for joy!"

I chuckled, "I won't go quite as far as she did -- rejecting anything even remotely Russian, and I certainly am not going to leave the Church. Saint Michael the Archangel is fairly typical of the OCA now, being mostly American. Holy Transfiguration is moving that way and, within a decade, will only be vaguely Russian, mostly because of the Slavic names and a few traditions from the Old Country. But, there is one thing I don't want to change."

"What's that?"

"I'd like you to keep calling me Petrovich!"

"So, your non-Russian friend is the one person who'll use your Russian name?"

"The bishop will use 'Mischa'. Normally, the married men would start calling me 'Petrovich', but I'll be a deacon, so nobody could really use that unless I gave them permission, and even then, only in private."

"What do your parents call you? I mean, after ordination?"

"Anything they want!" I chuckled. "But seriously, it'll depend on context. Privately, they and my in-laws will call me Mike. In public, 'Father Deacon' or

'Father Deacon Michael', though the 'Father' part is somewhat optional. And that's the usual way I'll be referred to and addressed, though some of the teens will probably opt for 'Deacon Mike', which is OK by me. And the bishop will only call me 'Mischa' in private. In public, he'll use my title, just as everyone else will. That's the tradition."

"So you'll be 'Doctor Loucks' in the hospital, Deacon Michael in the church. What about everywhere else?"

"That'll depend on context, too. Anyone who is Orthodox would call me 'Deacon', as would most other ordained clergy. Anyone who knows me outside of church will call me 'Doctor Loucks' or what I think I prefer, 'Doctor Mike'."

"And Elizaveta?"

"Husband!" I chuckled. "But for real, as of a week from Sunday!"

"Mike, otherwise, right?"

"Yes. And I will keep calling her «Котёнок» (*katyonak*) as her pet name and «Зайчик» (*zaychyk*) when I want to rile her up!" ("Kitten"; "bunny rabbit")

"Because you want her to fuck like one?" Clarissa teased.

"You have a one-track mind, Lissa!"

"You know I'm just messing with you! And I even waited until it was close to your wedding date so you wouldn't have to wait too long before you could do something about it!"

"You're all heart, Lissa!"

"I'm going to go shower and dress. See you at Doctor Blahnik's?"

"Yes."

She left, and I showered, dressed, and drove to Elizaveta's house. I let her know about Doctor Blahnik's invitation, and she decided to change into a skirt and blouse instead of her jeans and polo shirt. When she was ready, we left her house and headed back into the city.

"How much studying do you need to do this week?" I asked.

"A decent amount. And pretty much every night. You only have two exams, right?"

"Yes. My papers are finished and submitted. You remember my bachelor parties are on Friday and Saturday nights, right?"

"And you'll behave?"

"Yes. Sophia made sure Robby, Lee, and José knew what was and wasn't appropriate for a party for clergy. To be honest, there's more likely to be trouble from the grandfathers at church than my college friends!"

Elizaveta laughed, "My mom said the same exact thing! She told her dad to keep things under control. He just laughed."

"Oh, I'm sure," I chuckled. "You know they'll give me a rough time about just about anything to do with marriage. That's especially true because they believe you proposed to me!"

"Because I did!"

"That day on the bench outside church."

"Duh! It just took you a month to figure it out!"

"You caught me by surprise!"

"Which is YOUR fault! I talked to you for over a year, and you still went for girls who weren't Orthodox!"

"I believed you were too young. You corrected my incorrect impression, and here we are, nine days from being married! You turned sixteen less than a month ago, so it's not as if we could have married much earlier! And it's not as if you could have really approached me before you turned fifteen."

"You are VERY annoying when you're logical, husband!"

"Thank you!" I exclaimed with a huge grin.

"Are we going to see each other except at church this week?" she asked.

"I think that depends on how much you need to study. My exams are done on Tuesday."

"Are you playing golf with my dad?"

"No, because my stats exam is on Tuesday afternoon."

"Are you skipping dinner, too?"

"Yes. We won't begin playing golf again until after the trip to Europe. And obviously, once medical school starts, we'll have to work around studying."

"My parents would like us to have a regular family dinner, but that would conflict with our Sunday afternoons with Tasha, Alyssa, Nik, and Mark."

"I really don't want to give up that time; did you suggest an alternative?"

"No, I wanted to talk to you because I don't want to cause trouble between you and my parents. I was thinking of Saturday, the way we do now, but with a large meal at noon and then a light meal before Vespers. I know once you're a deacon, you aren't supposed to eat anything after Vespers."

"I think Saturday is fine. Tell your mom, don't ask her, that we'll do it on Saturday."

"Tell?"

"Yes. If we want to be in control of our lives, we need to set the ground rules, and it's better to do it now than try to change it down the road when your mom has become used to telling you what to do."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Remember, I have a Russian mom, too! She wanted to still be in control even after I turned eighteen. In fact, it was worse in a way because before I graduated from High School, what I wanted and what she wanted were basically the same thing. That changed, and that's when she tried to exert more control. I had to put my foot down. And honestly, remembering back to when I was little, my mom did the same thing with her mom about raising children."

"I'm not sure about that."

"I think it's perspective. You haven't really had a conflict with your parents, have you?"

"No."

"We will because there will be some disagreement about something, probably with raising our kids. And if we let them push us around now, it'll be even harder to break that later. Have your mom and your grandmothers had disagreements?"

"I'm not sure. If they have, I don't know about them."

"Ask your dad," I counseled. "I suspect he'll acknowledge they had disagreements. And all joking about the older ladies running everything aside, that's one tradition I don't want to keep in our family. So, talk to him, tell him what you're going to tell your mom, and then stick to it, even if she throws a fit."

"And who runs OUR household, husband?" Elizaveta demanded.

I chuckled, "Why, you do, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)!" then, after pausing for a beat, I added, "With my input." ("Kitten")

"Of course!" she laughed. "You know I was teasing!"

"You were, but only to a point! I do know quite a bit about Russian women! Even the ones who are mostly American! As my mom said, you can take the girl out of Russia, but you can't take Russia out of the girl! Of course, she was never actually in Russia, but she grew up in a Russian family in a Russian church, just as you did. Seriously, just explain to your dad what you plan to do, then simply tell your mom we'll have a regular family dinner at noon on Saturdays. If you want to take charge, then you need to take charge!"

"OK. I'll talk to her tomorrow before lunch."

"And I will back you one hundred percent!"

"What about your parents?"

"There won't be any joint family dinners anytime soon," I replied. "You know my dad doesn't want Paul in the house. Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. There's no doubt in my mind that we'll have to deal with all the issues surrounding grandparents and great-grandparents when we have kids, too."

Elizaveta laughed, "My grandmother, my mom's mom, was already giving me advice on raising children!"

"And it's OK to listen, but you and I decide, not them."

"I'm surprised at how strongly you're reacting."

"I've had some serious disagreements with my parents during the last four years, and not just about Paul Reynolds. But let's worry about all of this later and enjoy our evening!"

"Can I ask one thing before we change the subject?"

"Of course."

"It's about your relationship with your parents; you seem a bit, I'm not sure what the right word is, but distant?"

"Aloof?" I suggested. "And that's intentional in part and, in part, a result of the situation with Liz."

"Does that bother you?"

"Mostly, no, because I think it's the only way to be independent. We'll find an equilibrium eventually."

"But you and your grandfather get along really well."

I chuckled, "I'm positive that's because he's not my dad! And he's wise -- he makes it known what he wants and what he thinks should happen, but he doesn't push."

"And the money he gave you?"

"A gentle nudge," I chuckled. "It was the bishop he leaned on!"

Elizaveta laughed, "My dad said your grandfather did all the groundwork so that when the Parish Council made their request, it was already decided."

"Between the two old friends, yes."

"Do you think we can spend some time together, just you and me, after dinner?"

"Sure," I replied.

I turned onto the street where Doctor Blahnik lived, found a parking spot along the curb, and after I'd shut off the engine and set the parking brake, I got out and went around to help Elizaveta from the car. Once she was out, I locked the car, and we walked up to Doctor Blahnik's house and went inside. I was happy to see Joel and Milena were at the house, and a few minutes later, Clarissa and Abby arrived, followed less than a minute later by Mark and Alyssa.

"What's your fondest memory of college, Mike?" Milena asked when we sat down with glasses of wine.

"I believe any answer other than becoming betrothed to Elizaveta will lead to a slow, painful death!" I replied.

"You!" Elizaveta exclaimed and smacked my arm. "You can tell the truth because even I know what it is!"

"Oh?" I asked.

"Meeting Clarissa. She'll say the same thing; no offense, Abby."

"None taken," Abby said. "The one thing we don't have to worry about is either of them stealing the other away from us!"

"True!" Elizaveta declared.

It was true, but not for the reason both of them assumed. What Abby had said made it quite clear that Clarissa had kept our physical relationship from her. That didn't surprise me, nor concern me because I'd done the same thing with Elizaveta. It was the one secret which I couldn't share with Elizaveta.

"I'd ask your worst, but I'm sure it would be something to do with She Who Must Not Be Named!"

I laughed, "Afraid that saying her name will summon her like a demon?"

"Like?" Milena asked, laughing. "She IS a demon!"

"Who are you talking about?" Alyssa asked.

"A former dean who was Mike's nemesis," Milena said, "but really, a threat to all students. But let's forget about her!"

"If only it were that easy!" I replied.

"Are you going to live in the dorms?" Doctor Blahnik asked Mark and Alyssa.

"No," Alyssa replied. "We'll each live at home. It's kind of silly to spend the money when we each live less than two miles from the university."

"I was just thinking about having a bit of freedom from your parents."

"They're not really a problem for either of us," Mark said. "At least not enough to justify spending the money."

"You'll want to spend time with other students," Milena said.

"We've met most of Mike's friends, and a bunch of them will still be in Rickenbacker, so we'll be able to hang out with them. We know José, who's going to be the RA, too, so we'll be welcome on their floor."

"When do you leave for Spain, Milena?" Clarissa asked.

"In about three weeks. We'll be ready for you when you arrive! Mom and Derek will be there as well; they changed their original plans."

"Cool," Clarissa replied. Then turned to Mark and Alyssa, "You two should sign up for Milena's music survey class."

"And Doctor Blahnik's Russian literature class," I added. "Doctor Blahnik, have you heard anything about a replacement for Father Jacobs?"

"There are interviews scheduled for the first week in June. One is the minister of the local Lutheran church, who has an M-Div. Your friend Jocelyn attends there, I believe."

"Yes. She likes him a lot and says his homilies are very good, though teaching world religions is different from homiletics. I assume that's not for the Latin class, right?"

"Right. Latin might be dropped from the curriculum. Enrollment has been dropping for years, so unfortunately, it makes sense to simply eliminate it."

"My sister told me the High School in Harding County is likely going to drop it after next year. They'll have German, French, and Spanish, which I guess are the big three."

"Typically," Derek said. "Though Chinese and Russian would be good choices, if they want to replace Latin with something."

I chuckled, "Yes, because teaching the language of the Communist countries is going to go over SO WELL in Harding County!"

"YOU speak Russian!" Milena laughed.

"Yes, but there's a difference -- my learning Russian didn't require approval of the School Board! People in Harding County already suspect Mr. Black of being a communist, and all he does is teach the kids things they don't learn in any other class!"

"And people wonder why I'm concerned about Reagan!" she replied.

I shrugged, "He's anti-Communist, which is pretty good in my book. And I simply couldn't take Walter Mondale seriously. I avoided talking about the election with my friends, but I heard them debate at meals, and those discussions made it pretty clear which side I would vote for."

Milena laughed, "I voted for Reagan, too, but held my nose the whole way!"

"I must be the lone Democrat in the room, then," Abby declared.

I shook my head, "I'm pretty sure everyone here, except Mark and Alyssa, is registered Democratic."

There were nods.

"Is that a problem?" Mark asked.

"Not at all," I said. "Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat! And the LAST thing you'll hear any of our priests do is give a political endorsement!"

"At our old church, they basically told everyone who to vote for, and it was pretty clear that it wasn't permitted to vote for Democrats."

"Oh, give me a break!" Milena exclaimed. "Mike's church is rabidly anti-Communist, and they're mostly Democrats!"

"It was about abortion, prayer in schools, and stuff like that," Mark offered. "The pastor spoke out on those issues regularly."

"So long as there are pop quizzes, there will be prayer in schools, which nobody can prevent!" Abby declared, causing everyone to laugh. "And seriously, pray to which god? Thor? Jupiter? Shiva? I bet your former church wouldn't find those acceptable."

"No way!" he declared.

"Mike," Milena asked with a slight smile, "what would you say about that?"

I knew exactly what she wanted, so I gave it to her.

"When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

"That sure as heck doesn't sound like prayer in schools to me!" Abby declared.

"And I bet your old church didn't use the Lord's Prayer," Milena said. "Because it was 'repetition' and not 'authentic', right?"

"Or too Catholic," I added. "Despite the fact that Jesus commanded we should pray that prayer."

"All of those," Alyssa said. "It's funny how much we heard about the Bible, but how much it actually diverged from the Bible."

"Living the 'Sermon on the Mount' is a difficult thing," Doctor Blahnik said. "So is truly living 'love your neighbor as yourself'."

"May I comment on the 'prayer' verse I cited?" I asked, and when the others nodded, I continued. "It's about intent. It's OK to pray anywhere, it's the 'and be seen by others' part that's the key. Jesus also reproves the religious leaders for making a big show of their tithing and, in the same way, says they have their reward -- the approval of men. That's put in contrast with seeking the approval of God. That said, I would agree demanding public prayer in schools falls into the 'want to be seen' category."

There were nods of agreement, and just then, a timer rang in the kitchen.

"The roast is ready," Doctor Blahnik announced. "Shall we eat?"

Everyone moved to the dining room while Derek, Milena, and Doctor Blahnik went to the kitchen to bring the food. Five minutes later, we were all serving ourselves.

"Mike, effective immediately, I am Anicka!" Doctor Blahnik declared. "You turned in your last paper, and I graded it this afternoon!"

"Yes, Doctor Blahnik," I replied, tongue planted firmly in cheek, causing everyone to laugh.

We had a wonderful dinner and a nice dessert, then spent an hour in the music room where everyone took turns singing, including a few silly sing-alongs like *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. At about 10:00pm, Elizaveta and I thanked Doctor Blahnik for dinner and the fun evening, then left the house and agreed that we'd go to Verner's for ice cream. Once we got there, I got turtle sundaes for each of us, and we sat in a booth near the front window.

"Could we have ice cream after the Vespers Divine Liturgy on Wednesday night?"

"If that won't interfere with your studying."

"It won't. I'll have plenty of time after school and before church."

"Then yes, of course!"

"Hi, Mike!" a male voice said.

I looked up to see Mike Palmer, who had Maggie with him.

"Hi, Mike," I said. "Long time no see!"

"Still playing chess?"

"Only occasionally," I replied. "I don't have a lot of free time. This is Elizaveta, my fiancée. Elizaveta, Mike Palmer, a former chess coach at Harding High; his girlfriend is Maggie Schumacher, one of my sister's friends."

"Fiancée," Maggie replied. "Nice to meet you, Elizaveta."

"Nice to meet both of you," Elizaveta replied.

"Congrats," I said.

"Thanks!" Maggie said. "We'll leave you alone. Mike just wanted to say 'hello'."

Mike and I nodded to each other, and they walked away. Elizaveta and I finished our ice cream, left the shop, and walked to my car so I could take her home.



May 21, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"Last day!" Clarissa said with a smirk when she came to my room on Tuesday morning so we could have breakfast together.

"You made that joke on Friday! Who's meeting us this morning?"

"Just José and Dona. Everyone else is sleeping in. José and Dona are early risers like we are."

"Sandy and Sophia had real trouble getting out of bed early!"

"Because they liked to sleep or because they liked to fuck?" Clarissa teased.

"Sleep," I chuckled, "though the other thing happened, obviously."

"Obviously!"

"And be honest, Lissa, you didn't want to get out of bed when we were cuddled together!"

"True," she allowed. "Tomorrow is a special service at church, right?"

"A Vesperal Divine Liturgy for the Ascension. The usual practice is to do a regular Divine Liturgy on the morning of the Feast, but so many people would have to miss work unless we started at 6:00am, and most people wouldn't get up! In an Orthodox country, this would be a public holiday. Technically, we need to do Vespers and, before them, the Paschal hours, but in modern practice in the US, we don't. We'll do a shortened version of the Pascal Matins before the Vesperal Divine Liturgy."

"I never asked, but how are you handling your fasting rule after Sunday?"

I chuckled, "We aren't. First of all, Pentecost isn't until June 2nd, so we're good until then. And Father made it clear that we have not just «ekonomia» from the Apostle's Fast in June, but that we're not to observe any fasting of any kind during our honeymoon. That's the norm, really, and ours was extended for our entire trip to Europe."

"So, eat, drink, and fuck to your hearts' content?" Clarissa teased.

"Now THAT sounds like a good plan!" José declared from behind Clarissa.

"Let's go to breakfast, you degenerates!" Dona said from the hallway.

"As if you would object!" José teased.

"Well, no," Dona admitted with a smirk.

"And yes, that is the general idea of a honeymoon!" I agreed. "But not necessarily in that order!"

Everyone laughed, and we left the dorm to have breakfast in the cafeteria.

After breakfast, the four of us went to my room to relax for an hour before Dona and José left so they could study for their afternoon exam, and Clarissa and I could review for our biology stats exam. We had lunch with the gang before we headed to the final exam of the final semester of the final year of our undergraduate period.

The exam was tough but not overly so, and when we finished, Sandy, Fran, Clarissa, and I felt we'd done well enough to maintain our A's in the class.

"And that," Fran declared as we left the science building, "is a wrap!"

LXV. The Calm Before The Storm

May 22, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"This is so weird!" Clarissa said when she came to my room on Wednesday morning.

"The calm before the storm!" I replied.

"You mean all the stuff that happens at the end of the week?"

"Yes, but I was actually thinking of medical school! And our last Summer!"

"Isn't that an ABBA song?"

"Yes," I chuckled. "It's about two young lovers who had a last Summer in Paris. Now he's a banker named Harry, is married, has kids, likes soccer, and is boring, but his lover remembers how things were when they were young."

"And just how do YOU know that, Mr. 'I hate ABBA'?"

"My assignment from Anicka! I was compelled!"

"Uh-huh!"

"It's true! And honestly, I learned some very interesting things comparing the music. For example, if you listen to *Our Last Summer* you can hear part of a song from *Chess* during a guitar solo."

"Who plays the guitar?"

"Björn, though he's the one without the beard, which is funny because 'Björn' means 'bear' in Swedish, according to Anicka. Benny plays the keyboards. In this song, the solo is played by Lasse Wellander, a member of their backing band. I only noticed because I was carefully listening to the songs the way we learned in Milena's class."

"Ah, so like the Orthodox hymn at the beginning of the *1812 Overture*!"

"Yes, though I'm not sure this was supposed to be discovered. The musical *Chess* didn't have its premiere until four years after *Our Last Summer* was released."

"All that from that assignment?"

"I had to write a paper, remember?"

"What else did you discover? You were very careful not to listen to those albums when anyone else was around!"

"I have a reputation to protect!" I insisted.

"Oh, please! You have a Barry Manilow album! I think your reputation can survive having listened to ABBA!"

"Don't be so sure!"

"The one person most likely to give you grief about it is the person from whom you borrowed the albums!"

"She's been nice about it, actually. Shall we have breakfast?"

"Sure. But answer the question."

"That Andersson and Ulvaeus are musical geniuses, just as Doctor Blahnik, sorry, Anicka, said."

"Interesting. Does that mean you'll start liking ABBA?"

"Let's not get crazy now!"

Clarissa laughed and shook her head.

"What are we going to do after breakfast?" she asked when she stopped laughing.

"Be bums until I have to leave for church! We have zero obligations!"

"Which is what is so weird!"

We joined José and Dona for breakfast, and after we finished eating, they headed to exams while Clarissa and I went back to my room to listen to music.

"Why do you seem so calm?" Clarissa asked.

"Because getting married to a beautiful Orthodox girl is what I've wanted from about age fourteen! It's just not the timing I would have expected, but instead was the direct result of Deacon Grigory's repose."

"Repose?"

"That's the usual Orthodox way to refer to someone dying. I'm pretty sure I've used that term before."

"Yes, but I think only in reference to saints."

"Ah, OK. It applies in the general case. You'll hear it in prayers at a funeral service, though I hope the parish has no need for one for a long, long time."

"Going back to being calm; even if you've wanted this, I'd think you'd be at least a bit on edge."

"Why? This is exactly what I want and exactly what I need. Think about my past struggles."

"OK, I'm going to call BULLSHIT on that. You basically committed to chastity and did it with almost no struggle. That tells me you could have done that before, and instead, you elected not to. So I say you're full of shit when you call it a 'struggle'. You liked it and chose to do it, and all that internal angst was just a load of crap!"

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked apprehensively. "Did I hurt you somehow?"

"No," Clarissa said, shaking her head. "But if you could just go 'cold turkey' because Lara asked you to and then stick to it without any apparent trouble, you're fooling yourself about your past behavior and thinking. In fact, I'll prove it."

"I know what you're going to say," I sighed. "And no, I am not going to say I shouldn't have been with you or Milena."

"Hang on! Just those two?"

"The ones who weren't casual didn't have negative outcomes, and I can't say they were wrong in any way."

"Tasha?"

"You're demanding truth, and the truth is that what happened between Tasha and me was pure lust, and we both acknowledged that fact. We fucked because we wanted to and because we could."

"Ignoring the complicated situation with Jocelyn for the moment, what about Becky and Katy?"

"Becky was hurt because I never really gave her a chance. Oh, sure, I had my excuses, but they were just that, excuses. As for Katy, if I had known she was going to break up with me, I wouldn't have had sex with her."

"Right, because her swallowing your cum and you pushing your tongue deep inside her pussy wasn't 'sex'? Try selling that to a girl's dad before you marry her!"

"My behavior was inconsistent with a proper Christian life," I replied.

"But doesn't that include Milena and me?"

I nodded slowly, "In those terms, yes, and that's my true struggle -- I can't say it was wrong to make love with either of you, even if it was."

"Shit," Clarissa sighed. "I just managed to tie you in knots when you'd basically come to terms with your past. I'm sorry."

"It's OK to point out my hypocritical behavior," I replied. "I acknowledge it. But I wonder about the accusation that I could have been chaste had I simply wanted to. I'm not sure that was the case. Call it one of the stages of growing up, similar to what I wrote about in the speech I'm going to give on Saturday. The Mike who graduated from High School; the Mike who went through the turmoil with

Jocelyn and Liz; the Mike who had nearly two dozen lovers; the Mike who's going to be ordained a deacon after he marries. You've pointed out those stages yourself in various ways and at various times.

"But here's the thing -- I know I missed the mark, as it were. I confessed my failures and did as best I could, given who I was at the time. I made excuses for my behavior because I enjoyed what I was doing. But I also had experiences which helped make me who I am today. I'm not saying that the ends justify the means, but I'm not sure I'd be the same person I am without those experiences. In fact, I'm sure I wouldn't. Believe it or not, I'm reasonably satisfied with who I am; that wasn't the case for most of the past four years."

"You really regret Kimiko? And Sandy?"

"I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about them," I sighed. "Well, no, I know how I'm supposed to feel, and I don't feel that way. If you'll pardon the cliché, it's my cross to bear. I totally understand, now, why being chaste before marriage is valuable -- it doesn't create the kind of internal struggles I have now."

"Are you turning into a prude?"

I chuckled, "That'll be the day! Remember, I'm only concerned about what I do, not what anyone else does, with the exception of expecting my spouse to remain faithful to me just as I will to her. I know what the Church teaches, and I will teach that as the ideal that it is. But in private, with the right people, I'll do what my mom did with me. And that'll be true with my kids, obviously."

"I didn't mean to attack you."

"You didn't; It was, and is, a legitimate question. One which Father Nicholas and Elizaveta both asked, although not in such stark terms. That was the one area of conflict between Elizaveta and me."

"Once you agreed to her demands!"

I chuckled, "They weren't exactly outrageous! In fact, she got me the only way a fifteen-year-old could -- with pure logic! And even then, I wasn't the one who made the decision."

"What am I missing?" Clarissa asked.

"I asked YOU to marry me before I formally asked her."

"Oh, so it's MY fault?!"

"Yes!" I exclaimed with a silly grin. "It's your fault that four days from now, a sexy, naked sixteen-year-old girl, who has just become my wife, is going to beg me to fuck her brains out! Repeatedly!"

Clarissa laughed, "I suppose there's no harm in taking the blame for that!"

"Can I ask why you were so vehement before?"

"I guess I just want you to accept that what you did wasn't wrong, but I fear it's a losing battle."

"That's just it, Lissa. I struggled over all of that because it was wrong and it was right, and the internal conflict was real. Overwrought at times, I'm sure, but it was real. All through High School, I wanted to have sex even though I knew it was wrong. The hormones were that strong. And once I'd sampled the 'forbidden fruit', I didn't want to stop. What I learned about myself is that I DO have the willpower, if I have the right motivation. And I think that's a very important thing to understand about myself."

"That said, I simply can't deny what John writes -- *'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us'*. So what do I do? The same thing David did -- acknowledge that I've fallen short. *'For I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is always before me...Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit'*."

"Confession and repentance."

"Yes. Even if I can't say it was wrong, I can acknowledge that it was falling short of the ideal. One final verse -- *For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'*. That doesn't excuse it, but it, along with the verses we've talked about before about sin living in us, explain what happened."

"And your sin now?"

"The usual one -- pride. In one sense, I should have turned down the opportunity to give the valedictory address."

"No way! I read it. You NEED to give that speech, and people need to hear it. You didn't brag once about yourself in what I read; in fact, quite the opposite! You used your own failings as examples of experiences that helped you grow and learn. Would you say that a great teacher should refuse to teach because they might be proud of what they do?"

"No, but the question is always about motivation -- why are they doing it? To puff themselves up? Or for an altruistic reason? And can you REALLY be altruistic? If serving others fulfills your needs, aren't you being selfish by not being selfish?"

"You're making my head hurt!" Clarissa groaned. "I get it, but what you're saying is that nobody has pure motives!"

"Yes. I think that's the human condition."

"That's pretty deep."

"You didn't object when it was deep!" I teased.

Clarissa laughed, "Now THERE is the Mike I know and love!"

"Just because I beat myself up about my own motives and behaviors doesn't mean I'm going to become a moralizing prude! I know how to have fun and enjoy life! That is probably the most important thing I learned in the last four years."

"You didn't mention that in your speech."

"No, because that isn't the point. Most people aren't nearly as uptight and boring as I was when I first arrived on campus."

"No kidding," Clarissa said dryly. "But you know what? There's a reason why you're giving the valedictory speech."

"You mean besides the 4.0 GPA and being in the Honors Program and all the other stuff the Chancellor said?"

"Sorry, that's not what I meant. I meant why YOU are doing it."

"Because the committee selected me!"

"No, you idiot! Because the Chancellor asked you, and you couldn't say 'no' to him any more than you could say 'no' to your bishop! In fact, he's the 'metropolitan', and the Academic Committee is the 'synod'. You are incapable of saying 'no' in that kind of situation. It's your personality. You defer to whomever it is who has authority over you."

"Dean Parker?"

"She wasn't acting in your best interest OR the best interest of the school. That's a big difference."

"You're probably right," I replied.

"You need to be careful about that personality trait."

"Once I'm ordained a deacon, there's no 'careful' about it."

"I understand that; I meant outside the Church."

"Medical school? Isn't that a way to ensure you're at the top of the class? And as a Resident, to ensure you get an Attending position?"

"You're not worried about someone taking advantage of you?"

"I actually EXPECT them to! You've heard the stories about medical students and first-year Residents. The time to push back is after we have our Attending positions. THEN, we can work to change things. Before that? Except for something which harms the patient, we just kind of have to suck it up and do what we're told."

"Sad but true, I guess."

"You're awfully philosophical today, Lissa."

"I told you it was a weird day!"

"Weirder than High School graduation?"

"Way! But again, you're calm. Maybe your nickname should be 'Ice Man'."

"Is that what you thought when we made love?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

Clarissa laughed, "I'm not exactly the best person for anyone to ask about how 'hot' you are in that regard! That said, Tasha thought you were an absolutely amazing lover! And so did Milena. But you and me making love was different."

"True."

"I think you've found the right balance."

"Time will tell! Are you OK?"

"I think so," Clarissa replied. "It's just the big changes."

It suddenly hit me that it wasn't ME, it was Clarissa!

"Moving in with Abby is bothering you, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted quietly.

"Because it feels like getting married?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, still very quiet.

"Because it's one thing to have a girlfriend; it's another thing to actually live together. It's a real commitment at that point. And that scares you."

"I just don't see how you're so calm, and I feel so nervous!"

"I like Abby, Lissa. She's sweet, and I believe she really loves you."

"I know! That's what scares me! Haven't you had second thoughts?"

I shook my head, "No. Not once I had made up my mind. It will hit me when I'm standing in the church on Sunday afternoon! That's when I'll freak out!"

"No, you won't!"

"Yes, I will. The gravity of what I'm doing will hit me, and I'll feel like bolting. That same thing will happen when I'm ordained a deacon. It's normal to be nervous before a big event; I just don't get nervous until it's actually happening! And let's be honest here -- you love Abby, and you want to be with her."

"True," Clarissa sighed.

"And you know, no matter what, I'm there for you."

"I know. I love you, Petrovich."

"I love you, Lissa!"



May 24, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"You seem less apprehensive today," I said to Clarissa as we drove towards Abby's apartment with the last of Clarissa's things.

"After our talk yesterday, I realized it was kind of silly to be so nervous about doing something I really want to do! I guess it was getting my own key and putting my name on the lease that made it real, kind of how you reacted to getting your marriage license."

"That did make it more real, if that's a thing," I agreed. "And moving my stuff to the cottage. I just have the clothes I need for tomorrow and Sunday and my bathroom kit, which I'll take with me to Anicka's house tonight. I am, as they say, 'out of here!'"

"It was nice of Dean Anderson to let you basically resign two days early without any negative repercussions."

"The dorm will be half-empty by bedtime tonight, and there are other RAs available."

"What are you guys doing tonight?"

"I'll answer that when you answer the same question about Elizaveta's bridal shower!"

Clarissa laughed, "I'll be drummed out of the club! But you know darn well that nothing crazy went on. Just a bunch of girls being silly with lots of teasing."

"Which is pretty much what's going to happen tonight. We'll play cards, eat pizza, drink, and just hang out. Sophia was pretty clear with Robby and Lee about keeping things in line, not that any of the guys are crazy."

"You know it would be a VERY different party if you had let Clark plan it!"

"General debauchery!" I chuckled. "Except that Amy has him on a very short leash now that she agreed to move to Chicago with him. He's not allowed to play around at all! And really, for the past year, he's been way less free with his affection than the first three years."

"True."

"She was always playing the 'long game', and her strategy worked! If she had tried to tie him down exclusively, she'd have lost out. And I got the strong idea she went out with other guys as well."

Clarissa laughed, "You have NO idea!"

"What did I miss?"

"Nothing I can talk about!" Clarissa replied mirthfully. "And no, I do NOT mean me! I've been with Glenda, you, and Abby. And that's it!"

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks," I chuckled.

"*Hamlet*, right?"

"Yes. And it became a cliché referring to sexually fickle womanhood, though later, a general doubt of the person's sincerity. So it fits the current conversation perfectly!"

"You doubt me?!" Clarissa protested.

"No, but I know I can wind you up like nobody's business!" I chuckled. "But you left out your fling!"

My comment elicited one of Clarissa's rare giggles.

"Well, uhm, her, too! But, isn't the quote '*methinks the lady...*'?"

"No. As is often the case, usage changes, but the original has 'methinks' last. Another bit of trivia from Mr. Black."

"Did he ever actually teach the class he was supposed to teach?"

"Current Events? Yes. We read *US News & World Report* and *Newsweek* every week and discussed them, but there was plenty of time for all the really cool stuff once we got past 'Day 317 in captivity' or whatever it was that Ted Koppel said each night, ending with 444 on the day Reagan was inaugurated."

"Because the Ayatollah wasn't interested in an instantaneous multimillion-degree increase in local temperature in Tehran!"

"While that might have factored into it, it was the fifty tons of gold we gave them that actually secured the release. I'm sure the fear that Reagan would refuse to pay them was paramount in their minds for getting it done, in addition to the obvious threat of military action."

"You don't think we should have paid them?"

"No," I said firmly. "You don't negotiate with terrorists. All negotiating does is ensure you'll have more terrorism because they KNOW you'll pay them off in some way. If you NEVER pay off, then they know it's a futile effort."

"How does that fit with your complete pacifism?"

"I'm a pacifist, not a doormat! I would never initiate force, and if I ever had to respond, it would be with only that force which was sufficient to repel whatever force was being used against me."

"Blocking Will's punch and letting it be at that point. And not even reporting that."

"Yes. I'd have done whatever was necessary to protect Vickie from him, but only as much as necessary and with whatever minimal force was required."

"Turn the other cheek?" she asked.

"Leo Tolstoy, in *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, advocated complete nonresistance because the state is violent and uses military force to defend itself, against which individuals have no hope of physical resistance. He advocated universal Christian love as the only solution. There is much to be said for that, and it's a reasonable understanding of the literal words. But if you're going to take it literally, then when they hit you the third time, you can deck them!"

Clarissa laughed, "Nice."

"So, if we don't take it literally, then what? We do not repay evil with evil, but with good, but we also do not object to self-defense, at least to a point."

"So, would you kill to protect someone?"

I shook my head, "No. Intentionally taking a life is not something I could ever do. If the choice was between killing the other person and dying, I would prefer to die."

"What if it was your wife or child?"

I took a deep breath and let it out, "My fidelity to my Christian ideals would be severely tested. I honestly do not know what I would do in that kind of situation, and I do not want to ever find out. I'm afraid of what I might do. That said, there are many ways to peacefully resist -- the marches our bishops went on with Martin Luther King, for example. They refused to use violence, even though violence was used against them. And they won."

"Because others used force on their behalf!"

I shrugged, "I suppose that's true, and I don't know how to answer it except to say that our bishops didn't engage in violence of any kind."

We arrived at the apartment, and after Clarissa unlocked the door, we carried her things inside.

"Just put everything in the second bedroom," Clarissa said. "We have to work out closet space and where to put some of my stuff. We'll do that next week while you're spending three solid days fucking near Niagara Falls!"

"We do intend to go see the Falls!" I protested.

"Uh-huh!" Clarissa teased.

"We plan to sightsee in Europe, you know! And that includes Paris, where we have the hotel reservations courtesy of Lara! Marriage is not solely about sex, you realize, right?"

"And I can wind YOU up just as easily as you can me!"

"Shall we have my last lunch as a single man together?" I asked.

"A&W? Frisch's? The burger joint?"

"Any of those are fine. Do you have a preference?"

"It's YOUR last meal, Petrovich! I thought the condemned man got to decide!"

"Condemned to life with Elizaveta. Oh, darn!"

Clarissa laughed, "Yeah, I could see how that isn't punishment in any way, shape, or form! How about Frisch's and then Verner's?"

"Deal!"

We left Abby's, well, now Clarissa's, apartment, and headed to lunch and after lunch to Verner's for ice cream. When we got back to campus, we joined Jocelyn, Gene, Dona, José, Sophia, Robby, and Lee in the common area. The girls asked José and me to play our guitars, so we got them and began what turned into an impromptu concert as others from our gang and from the floor filtered in and stayed to listen.

We ended up playing for nearly two hours with several breaks in between 'sets' and for about ten minutes after Dale arrived. He had flown into Columbus and Viktor had arranged for a car to pick him up and bring him to McKinley.

When we finished, José and I put our guitars away. I grabbed my bag, we bade the girls 'goodbye' and the guys left the dorm and headed to Doctor Blahnik's house.

"Hi, Anicka!" I called out when we walked in.

"Hi, Mike! I'm just about to leave for Milena's. Joel will arrive after work, and Derek should be here any minute. The house is yours! Have fun!"

"Thank you!" I said.

We hugged, and she gave me a quick peck on the lips, which generated whistles and catcalls from Robby, Lee, Dale, Gene, José, Pete, and Jason.

Anicka laughed, "That was NOTHING! Just a 'goodbye' kiss!"

She winked, then kissed me softly, causing the guys to make even louder noises.

"I'll apologize to Elizaveta later," she said quietly. "It was fun to tease the guys!"

"It's OK. Nobody will say anything, and it was just a friendly kiss, right?"

"Right!" she said, winking.

We both laughed, exchanged a hug, and she headed out the door.

"Now THAT would have been a hell of a Bachelor's party!" Dale teased.

"And then I'd be dead!" I replied. "So, what's up?"

"The pizzas were ordered this morning," Robby replied. "They'll be delivered around 6:00pm. Jack and Brandon are finishing their last exams, and they'll be here as soon as they're done. Mark should be here any moment. Nik is driving down from OSU and should arrive soon. The other guys from Taft we invited will be here by 6:00pm. I'm not sure what time Doctors Stanton, Norris, and Hart will be here, but they promised to show up at least for a bit."

"The beer, pop, and bourbon are here," Lee said. "I brought the beer and pop over this morning along with the ice and put them in the coolers. There are bags of Ruffles, Doritos, and Fritos in the kitchen. I believe Pete has the cards and chips."

"I do," he said, holding up his gym bag.

"And I believe José spoke to Doctor Blahnik about music," Robby added.

"Yep, I did," he confirmed. "She has an extensive collection of music, though I prefer Mike's choices! That said, there's plenty of good Latin music to liven things up!"

"Is this where the party is?" Clark called out from the front hallway.

"It is!" Robby called back. "Come on in!"

Clark, Carter, Larry, and Kenneth, a Freshman whose family lived close to Clark's, all came into the great room.

"You know what sucks, White Boy? You being a minister! No strippers!"

"It's not like you haven't seen your share of gorgeous female flesh these last four years!" I chuckled.

"Yeah, but once they see Clark..." he said, with what could only be called a 'shit-eating grin'.

There were groans and head shakes all around. A few minutes later, Mark walked in, followed by Derek. Everyone got something to drink, José put on some music with a really good beat, and Pete got out the cards and chips. The rest of the guys showed up as planned, and the pizzas were delivered at 6:00pm.

"We should have invited the girls," Brandon said. "At least we could dance!"

"Robby and Lee will dance with you, I'm sure!" Jack said.

"They're nice guys, but no thanks!"

"Are you seriously considering moving to Japan in two years?" Larry asked.

"It's pretty much the only way to stay together with Kimiko," he said. "I've been taking lessons in Japanese, and Kimiko's dad can arrange a position for me as an English teacher in a private school while Kimiko works on her Master's at a university in Tokyo."

"Are you getting married?"

He nodded, "That's the plan. A civil ceremony here and then a Shinto wedding in Japan."

"You're going to convert?" Jake asked.

"You can't be Japanese without practicing Japanese customs. And you all know I'm not the religious type, so it's not like I'm really giving up a church or anything."

"How are her parents dealing with this?" I asked.

"It was touch and go at first, but once I committed to raising our kids as fully Japanese, and in Japan, they mellowed quite a bit."

"Have you been there?" Larry asked.

"No. We're planning a trip for next Summer so I can check out Tokyo and her hometown and meet whoever I need to meet about the teaching position."

"And I thought the White Boy was crazy!" Clark said.

"Says the man who invited Amy to live with him in Chicago!" I retorted.

"We've been dating for four years! You got engaged to Elizaveta a month after you met her!"

"I actually met her Freshman year, but she was way too young. She started flirting with me during Junior year, but I basically ignored her because she was still too young."

"Dude, she's still only sixteen!" Clark retorted.

I nodded, "Yes, but she was TWELVE when I first met her. There's a big difference! And sixteen is both legal AND legal to marry. And you know my situation."

"Anyone dumb enough to let some dude in fancy robes and a big hat close enough to make him a preacher might just be too dumb to be a doctor!"

I chuckled, "Then it's a good thing he's not making me a preacher and never will! A deacon is a servant, not a pastor. That's a HUGE difference. That said, if you want to release me from my promise of free medical care, I'm happy to allow that!"

"Let's not be hasty now!" he replied with a laugh.

The rest of the evening continued the same way, I managed to drink enough to satisfy the guys but not so much that I was drunk. I said several 'goodbyes' because my time would be limited, the most important of them was Clark.

"Don't get all mushy on me now, White Boy!"

"I'm going to miss you," I said.

"Didn't I just say don't get mushy?"

"It's not going to be the same around here without you."

"Nobody to take care of all the ladies now that you're getting married?"

I chuckled, "And you're taking Amy to Chicago, so they all lose out! Just admit you'll miss me!"

"You're a pain in the ass, White Boy! You have been since day one!"

"You love me anyway," I chuckled.

Clark smiled and nodded, "I do."

We shook hands, clapped each other on the back, and rejoined our friends. The party finally broke up at about 1:30am, and Dale crashed in the guest room while I used the upstairs room.



May 25, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

My alarm went off at the usual time on Saturday morning. I said my morning prayers, then went out to run before returning for a shower and breakfast with Dale. Immediately after breakfast, Dale and I headed to the cottage so that Father Nicholas could perform the customary blessing before Elizaveta and I moved in the following evening after the wedding reception. Jocelyn, Clarissa, Mark, Alyssa, Nik, and Tasha would be waiting for us, and when I arrived, after introductions, they, Elizaveta's parents, Dale, Elizaveta, Father Nicholas, and I went through the house to the backyard.

Father Nicholas began by drawing a cross on each of the four main interior walls with blessed olive oil. Once he completed that, he put on his *epitrachil* and we all gathered in the small living room for the service, which began with the *Trisagion* prayers, which were followed by Psalm 91, and then a *troparion* in Tone 8:

As salvation came unto the house of Zacchaeus at Thine entrance, O Christ, and likewise now at the entrance of Thy sacred ministers, and, with them, Thy holy Angels, do Thou grant Thy peace unto this house and mercifully bless it, saving and illumining all who are about to live in it.

This was followed by prayers which referenced Jesus coming to the home of Zacchaeus and the accounts of the blessing of Laban's house when Jacob was received and Potiphar's house when Joseph was received. Father Nicholas then said the prayer of blessing.

O Lord, our God, look down now with mercy on the prayer of Thy lowly and unworthy servant, and send down the Grace of Thy Most-holy Spirit on this oil, and sanctify it, that it may be for the sanctification of this place and on this house that has been constructed, and for the expelling of every contrary power and satanic snare: For Thou art He that blesses and sanctifies all things, O Christ, our God, and unto Thee do we send up glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

After the prayer, Father Nicholas used an aspergillum to sprinkle water on each of the four exterior walls as well as each room, praying...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, by the sprinkling of this Holy Water, let every evil demonic activity be put to flight.

To which everyone replied 'Amen'. After that, he anointed the walls once again with oil while saying...

This house is blessed through the anointing of this Holy Oil, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

And we all responded with "Amen".

Once the anointing was complete, Elizaveta and her mother lit votive lamps in each room, as well as two which were on the coffee table in the living room. After several more prayers, Father Nicholas proclaimed the Gospel account of Jesus' entry into Zacchaeus' house from the 19th Chapter of Luke, after which he read Psalm 101, and said the final prayers, then gave the dismissal.

Once the service was completed. Viktor and I hung icons in a corner of the living room which faced generally east. The icon of Christ was the one I had brought from home, which my dad had given me, and the others were gifts from the congregation -- icons of the *Theotokos*; Michael the Archangel; and Elizabeth, the Mother of John the Baptist, all of which had been blessed at the Vespertal Divine Liturgy the previous Wednesday. Once those were hung, we hung votive lamps before them, then went to the bedroom to hang my personal icon of Michael and Elizaveta's personal icon of Elizabeth over the bed. Those tasks completed, everyone left the cottage so we could have tea and cakes in the main house.

"What time do you need to be at the assembly point, Mike?" Viktor asked.

"10:15am so I can be briefed by the marshals. I'll be on the stage until after the speeches are given, then I'll take my spot with the graduating class."

"Have you brought everything here?"

"All I have left are some clothes and my toiletries. Everything else is in the small bedroom or wherever Elizaveta put it in the cottage."

"You haven't looked, Subdeacon?" Father Nicholas asked.

"I saw the stereo in the living room next to the TV, but I wasn't paying much attention to anything else. We really won't be spending much time there until we come back from Europe, so I think I'll worry about it then."

"And we'll have all the gifts from the wedding to put away as well," Elizaveta said. "But that will wait until we come back."

"If you all don't mind, I'd like to spend a few minutes with Elizaveta."

"Yes, of course!" Viktor replied. "We'll see you at the graduation party this afternoon and then with the men tonight after Vespers."

I took Elizaveta's hand, and we walked out of the house and went to the backyard to sit on our usual bench.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

I smiled and took her hand, "No. I just wanted a few peaceful minutes with my betrothed. The next twenty-four hours are going to be crazy, and we're not going to have any time alone."

"Tomorrow night, we will!" she said, squeezing my hand.

"And we'll just sit quietly together and talk?" I asked.

"Only if you want to die, husband!" she said fiercely.

"I suppose a kiss or two would be appropriate," I replied.

"And your idea of 'peaceful minutes' is teasing me?" she asked testily.

I leaned over and put my lips close to her ears, "I promise to fulfill your every fantasy!"

She sucked in her breath, shuddered, and squeezed my hand. We sat quietly for about ten minutes before we went back inside to spend a few minutes with our guests, and then Dale and I headed back to Doctor Blahnik's house so I could change and put on my graduation gown along with gold braids signifying that I'd graduated *summa cum laude*.

"Driving or walking?" Dale asked.

"Walking," I replied. "I can burn off a bit of nervous energy. And I'm going to have to sit during most of the ceremony, so walking is good."

"Then, let's go!"

We left the house and walked towards campus.

"I'm sorry I can't make it up to Madison next weekend," I said.

"Dude, if I had just married a girl like Elizaveta, I sure as hell wouldn't come to my graduation! Hell, I'd skip my own graduation for her!"

"Thanks for letting me off the hook."

"You owe me a visit in Seattle."

"I consider that more than a fair trade. We'll just have to work out the timing."

"I know your schedule will suck. Bring Jocelyn and Gene, too."

"I'm sure they'll be happy to visit. They're permanent, you know."

"I got that idea from talking to him last night. He's a great guy."

"And you?"

Dale grinned, "I am sure there are plenty of eligible girls in Seattle!"

"And you're just the guy to sample a wide variety!"

He shook his head, "Nah, now it's serious. College was meant to be fun. Now it's time to start looking for the future Mrs. Dale Melrose."

"Cool."

We arrived on campus, and Dale went to the Student Union while I went into the Administration building, where all the people who would be on the dais were gathering. I was greeted by Chancellor Evans and others and got a glass of ice water. I went to a quiet corner, took out my note cards, and reviewed my speech until the marshals came in to review the ceremony with us. Just before 11:00am, we lined up and waited for the signal that we should walk to the football field for the graduation ceremony.

I realized, just then, that despite my nerves, I was exactly where I was supposed to be. The signal was given, and we began our walk.

LXVI. Vale dicere

May 25, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

"In Psalm 8, we read -- *'When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers; The Moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You are mindful of him; And the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels; And You have crowned him with glory and honor; You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet'*.

"'Crowned him with glory and honor' -- that is us, today, crowned with glory and honor, ready to move out into the world and take our place, be that a job, further schooling, starting a family, joining the military, or some other endeavor. Getting here was not easy; in fact, the best description comes from a song I'm going to sing with Elizaveta Viktorovna Kozlova at our wedding tomorrow -- *The road is long, there are mountains in our way; But we climb a step every day.*

"We aren't done with that journey by any means, rather, we're at a significant waypoint, a milestone. We share many milestones -- our first day of school; our first love and first kiss; our driver's licenses; graduating from High School; and now, graduating from college. But ahead lie many other possible mile markers -- graduate school; marriage; the birth of a child; the marriage of a child; the birth of a grandchild.

"I look forward, and I remember back; that which came before informs that which will come in the future. I am not the same person I was when I left home to come to William Howard Taft, and yet, I am still Michael Peter Loucks. As Shakespeare wrote -- *'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many*

parts'. Today, I play the part of a young man graduating college; tomorrow, that of a husband.

"I arrived at Taft a naïve young man of eighteen, whose life was centered in Harding County, Ohio, and who, despite great desire, was unfit mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically to fulfill his self-perceived destiny -- to be a doctor. I think, perhaps, that is true for most of us sitting here today. We are not the same persons we were when we came here, and, frankly, if we are, then we've learned nothing.

"Oh, most certainly, we learned material in our courses, but that is only part of what college is meant to be. But the grades and these gold or silver braids signifying honors are only a means to an end -- entrance into a graduate program or an aid to getting our first job. Beyond that, except for pride in an accomplishment, they really are limited in their use and are perhaps even, ultimately, *'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'*.

"For if we are defined simply by our grades, we've missed the entire point of being here -- to grow and to become the men and women we were meant to be. We've made new friends, had new experiences, and hopefully, have learned to think and act in ways which we might never have considered in High School. My goals have not changed, but I certainly have. And if there is one thing of which I am certain, it is that the phrase *'to thine own self be true'* must guide us going forward.

"We will only achieve our true potential if we are true to ourselves. And sometimes, being true to ourselves means going against the crowd and marching to the beat of our own drummer. Know when to break the rules, for some rules were meant to be broken. On Sunday, March 21, 1965, when I was two years old, Greek Orthodox Archbishop IAKOVOS was one of the few whites who joined Doctor Martin Luther King to march from Selma to Montgomery. He said something which I think applies to all of us -- that he and his archdiocese could

no longer simply be a 'spectator and listener', but must work actively in pursuit of equality and justice. He broke the rules because it was the right thing to do. For this, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Carter in 1980.

"Archbishop IAKOVOS, by the way, graduated *magna cum laude*, but I only know that because I looked it up! Those grades didn't matter one bit when he was marching and facing down police with batons, dogs, and fire hoses. They didn't matter one bit when he led his congregation, mostly Greek immigrants, to support the civil rights movement. What mattered, to borrow a quote from Doctor King was the content of Archbishop IAKOVOS' character.

"And that is what is going to matter for us. Trust me, no patient in the ER is going to care whether I had this gold braid on my shoulder! As the joke goes, 'What do you call the person who graduates last in their class in medical school?' The answer is -- 'Doctor!' What the patient will care about is my ability, with God's help, to cure them of their illness or repair an injury they've suffered. They won't care if I went to Stanford Medical School or Saint George Medical School in Grenada. They won't care if I have scores of awards on my wall. What they will care about is whether or not Doctor Mike has the compassion and skills to help them. That's going to be true for all of us, no matter what our endeavor -- our passion, our skills, our compassion, all are going to matter far more than the grades or even the parchment which we're about to receive.

"I'm reminded of something Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians -- '*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal*'. The kind of love he's speaking about is «agápē» -- self-giving, self-sacrificing love. The love that Jesus spoke about when he said '*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends*'. Saint Paul used it in his letter to the Ephesians when he instructed husbands to love their wives, giving themselves up for their wives the way Christ gave Himself for the Church.

"That is the kind of love we need to have for each and every person around us. Race doesn't matter. National origin doesn't matter. Sexual orientation doesn't matter. Faith doesn't matter. Political affiliation doesn't matter. Wealth doesn't matter. If we don't do what Archbishop IAKOVOS did -- put aside our theological, cultural, political, and spiritual differences and work together to make the world a better place -- we'll all surely turn it into a preview of hell. I don't know about you, but that's the last place I want to be.

"Maybe, no, surely, some of you don't believe in Hell, and that's fine. There is an equation of 'Gehenna' with a perpetually burning dump, and that is exactly what we're going to turn this world into if we don't love each other. Or, maybe it will just be one massive, worldwide conflagration and then nothing, as thousands of nuclear weapons detonate, destroying the earth. That would follow the prophecy after the Flood when God promised not to destroy the world again with water, and the prophecy is that it will be destroyed in fire. Trust me when I say that is a prophecy I do not wish to be fulfilled!

"What is my charge for you today? To follow the basic principles of the 'Sermon on the Mount' -- be the 'light of the world' and 'let your light shine'; 'let your yes be yes and your no be no'; 'turn the other cheek'; 'go the extra mile'; 'love your neighbor as yourself'. But it doesn't stop there because love can't stop there. Jesus says -- *'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you'*. Not an easy thing, but it's the only way forward. Christian or not; believer in God or not; we are all called to love one another. As Doctor King said, we must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

"Lastly, it is the case that we will make mistakes, and I have made a number of them since I came to Taft. Each of those mistakes provided some kind of lesson, and my challenge, each and every time, was to discover the lesson, learn that

lesson, and resolve not to repeat the mistake. Those times when I didn't learn my lesson, I made things worse when I repeated the mistake, and one of those times, I hurt someone I love quite badly. Fortunately, she forgave me, and she's here today. Learn from your mistakes; forgive the mistakes of others. If that is the only thing you remember from my speech, I'll be satisfied that I've done some good.

"I would be remiss if I concluded without remembering the friends I've made here at Taft and the friends from back home who are here as well. I can tell you with absolute certainty I would not be standing before you without their help. I'd give you a litany of names of new friends, but I'd leave someone out, and that would be hurtful, so I will name just one name, that of my best friend and the person most responsible for the man you see today before you -- Clarissa Saunders.

"I also need to thank my parents and grandparents; my sister and her husband; my future in-laws; my therapist, who probably needs therapy after counseling me; my professors; my High School teachers, especially Mr. Black; and my two best friends from High School, Jocelyn Mills and Dale Melrose. Again, I could give a litany of names besides those two, but I'll name just one -- Doctor Anicka Blahnik, without whom I probably wouldn't have survived college and who taught me to play guitar. And I would be remiss if I failed to thank Chancellor Evans for the opportunity to speak today.

"In conclusion, allow me to leave you with a final thought from Shakespeare, one with which I heartily agree -- *'I count myself in nothing else so happy as in a soul remembering my good friends'*.

"Therefore, I say *vale dicere* -- 'farewell'. Thank you, good luck, and Godspeed!"

Chancellor Evans came to the podium, shook my hand, and put a gold medal around my neck. As the students and guests applauded and cheered, I left the

stage to take my place amongst the graduating class. I was in the middle seat of the middle row of chairs, and unfortunately, the students to my immediate right and left were from other dorms, and I didn't really know them. I'd have strongly preferred to sit with my friends, but we were scattered through the alphabetically-seated student body.

The roll call of students began with John Ackerman, and eventually to me.

"Michael Peter Loucks, Bachelor's Degree in Biochemistry, *summa cum laude!*" Chancellor Evans announced.

I walked across the stage, shook hands with him as he handed me a diploma cover, as the actual diplomas would not be available until after final grades were recorded, and then I shook hands with the Chair of the Board of Regents, Dean Anderson, the Most Reverend James Anthony Griffin, and Senator Robert Taft, Jr, before returning to my seat.

Finally, the last student, Susan Zander, received her diploma, and once she had returned to her seat, we stood, and Chancellor Evans gave us his final charge.

"Students of the Graduating Class of 1985, I hereby declare that each of you has achieved the necessary requirements for graduation, and I discharge you from this university! Congratulations, and good luck! This commencement ceremony is now closed."

Caps flew into the air as the assembled students and guests roared and applauded. I carefully picked my way through the mob of students and found Clarissa. We exchanged a hug and a quick kiss and were quickly joined by Sandy, Pete, Fran, and Jason. The six of us put our arms around each other in a group hug, then everyone exchanged individual hugs. Fran produced a camera and got another student to take several snapshots of the gang.

"Holy shit!" Sandy exclaimed when the photos were done. "We actually did it!"

"And now it's 'Miller Time'! Pete declared. "Let's get out of these stupid robes and get to the lake for the party!"

"I'll see you guys there," I said. "There is someone I need to find!"

"Assuming you want to live long enough to go to the party!" Clarissa teased. "I need to go find my parents."

"I'm glad they came."

"Me, too."

I made my way through the milling students to where my family, both old and new, were waiting. I took Elizaveta in my arms, and we exchanged a soft kiss.

"Congratulations, husband!" she said with a huge smile.

We kissed again, and then I hugged my parents, my grandparents, my sister, and Jocelyn before shaking hands with Dale and Paul and then all of my soon-to-be in-laws.

"I'm going to go change," I said. "See you all at the lake?"

"We have picnic areas 2 and 3 reserved," Viktor said. "Mike, do your friends know where to come?"

"They know the party is at the lake, and I think they'll be able to find us! See you there!"

I took Elizaveta's hand, and Dale walked with us back towards Doctor Blahnik's house.

"When do you graduate, Dale?" Elizaveta asked.

"Next Saturday at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison. And then, two days later, I'm off to Seattle for my job with Boeing. I told Mike you guys need to come visit, though I know medical school makes the timing difficult."

"Do you have a steady girlfriend?"

"No. The girl I was dating is a Sophomore, and neither of us thinks a long-distance relationship will work at this point."

"Mikayla needs a date for the reception," Elizaveta offered. "She's cute and fun, and she's a Junior at Ohio State."

I chuckled, "We haven't even had the wedding ceremony, and the «бабушка» (*babushka*) shows up!" ("Grandmother")

"Oh, please!" Elizaveta protested. "Dale needs a date, Mikayla needs a date. They'll sit together for dinner and have a dance! I'm not trying to get them married! Anything more than dinner and a dance is up to them!"

"Dale?" I inquired.

"I don't see what it can hurt!"

"I'll tell my grandmothers, and they can move the place cards before the reception," Elizaveta declared.

"Mike, that was an awesome speech," Dale said. "Thanks for mentioning me."

"You're welcome, and honestly, how could I not mention my two best friends from High School? I owe you both debts I can never repay."

"Sure you can; you do it every day by being our friend."

We arrived at Doctor Blahnik's house, and I went upstairs. I removed my gown and hung it in the closet, putting the gold medal into my bag. I put the cap and diploma cover on the shelf, then changed into jeans, a T-shirt, and my Cincinnati Reds cap. Elizaveta had worn blue jeans and a blouse for the graduation ceremony, and Dale had changed into shorts and a T-shirt while I had been upstairs. The three of us left the house, got into my Mustang, and headed for Milton Lake, where we'd be joined by my friends and, for those who had graduated with me, their families and other guests.

"So, how does it feel to have graduated?" Mom asked when we arrived.

"I hope you'll forgive me for saying so, but today was the second-most important event this weekend!"

Mom laughed, "If you had said otherwise, you'd be dead where you stand!"

"I'm happy," I said, "but my entire focus for the past six months has been on tomorrow afternoon, though obviously I spent time studying and going to class."

"Are you still planning on visiting Niagara Falls next week?"

"Yes. And then we're off to Europe, though fortunately, not until after Jocelyn has her surgery."

"Surgery?"

"She needs spinal surgery to relieve pressure on a compressed nerve. It's something that was expected at some point because of the reconstruction they had to do after her accident. Fortunately, she can have it done before I leave, and obviously, Gene will be here for her while I'm in Europe."

"Is he the 'real deal'?" Mom asked.

I nodded, "Absolutely. I don't expect them to get married for three or four years, but they're every bit as serious as Elizaveta and I are."

"Is it true that Vladyka ARKADY will join us here?"

I nodded, "Yes. He'll come for about an hour, and then he and Father will leave for Vespers. I've been excused from serving tonight and tomorrow."

"The one time, except perhaps at clergy conventions, Mike and I will get to stand together in church!" Elizaveta said. "And even then, I bet the Bishop selects him to serve at those!"

"That was one thing which bothered me about my dad," Tasha said, coming up to the small group. "He could never worship together with the family. Well, he did, but you know what I mean -- stand with us."

"Don't look now," I said quietly, "but your dad just arrived!"

"Ugh," Tasha groaned. "And he's wearing his cassock!"

I chuckled, "You know the bishop wants his clergy to wear their cassocks unless their work requires civilian clothes. I escape because I'm minor clergy, at least for now."

"Will the bishop wear his normal *ryassa* and *kamilavka*?" Tasha asked.

"Yes, though he has lightweight ones for Summer."

"May I ask what he wears in his office?" she inquired.

"Just a cassock, usually, from what Subdeacon Alexi told me, and that's what he was wearing when I was in his study at the chancery in Columbus. Mom, Dad, if you'll excuse us, I need to get something to drink for Elizaveta and myself, and then we need to circulate."

"Of course," Mom replied.

I took Elizaveta's hand, and we walked over to where the coolers were. I got a Dr Pepper for myself and a Coke for her, and we walked over to where Mark, Alyssa, José, Dona, Robby, Lee, and Sophia were sitting.

"Robby said your speech was going to be awesome," Sophia said, hopping up for a hug. "He was right!"

"Thanks," I said, giving her a tight hug and receiving a quick kiss in return.

"Careful, Greek girl!" Elizaveta teased.

"Bring it, Russian girl!" Sophia teased back.

"Now, this could be VERY interesting," Pete declared from behind me.

Sandy, Clarissa, and Abby were with him.

"Ignore him!" Sandy said.

"Men can be real pigs at times!" Clarissa declared, winking at me. "But I'm not sure who I'd bet on in that fight!"

I laughed when both Elizaveta and Sophia put their hands on their hips and turned to stare at Clarissa.

"Now you've stepped into it, Lissa!" I chuckled. "I'll leave you to sort this out! I see Anicka and Derek have arrived."

I walked away from the silly face-off and moved over to Anicka and Derek. He shook my hand and offered congratulations, and then Anicka gave me a hug.

"How does it feel?"

"Amazing!" I replied, squeezing my arms slightly to hug her more tightly. "And it feels good to have graduated!"

Derek laughed, "Milena always said he was a tease and a flirt!"

"Oh, don't I know it!" Anicka replied, releasing me from the hug.

"Congratulations, Mike."

"Thank you. You were instrumental in helping me get this far."

She smiled, "Students like you, Clarissa, and José are what makes teaching so rewarding. I hope you'll continue to visit, at least from time to time."

"We will. I wanted to let you know that I'm going to give the balalaika to Clarissa to bring to the reception."

"OK. I was going to ask you how you wanted to handle that to keep it a secret. And speaking of which, here comes your young lady."

"Hi, Doctor Blahnik!" Elizaveta exclaimed.

"You should call me Anicka as well, Matushka Elizaveta!"

"As my mom keeps reminding me, not yet!" Elizaveta replied with a soft laugh. "I call him 'husband', but that's not actually true until tomorrow, and he won't be a full deacon until August!"

"I see Sophia is still alive," I chuckled.

"She kissed you to tease me, you realize that, right?"

"And here I assumed it was because I was a brown-eyed, handsome man in good physical shape!"

"You would!"

"Elizaveta, may I share a secret with you?" Anicka asked.

"Yes."

"None of those girls can hold a candle to you!"

Elizaveta beamed.

"Mike, your speech was very good," Anicka said. "Now, if only we could get political leaders on both sides of the Iron Curtain to heed that call to peace!"

"If they haven't listened to well-known international figures, I doubt they're going to listen to a new college graduate from a small state school."

"More voices are always helpful," she said. "Have you heard of a group called «Médecins Sans Frontières»?"

I nodded, "Doctors Without Borders. I saw posters from them in a couple of the medical schools."

"You should get in touch, even if you can't necessarily do anything overseas in the short term. I believe, though, that you can spend time with them for your clinical work. I think your mindset matches theirs almost to a T."

"It's something to keep in mind for two or three years from now," I replied. "And obviously, I'd have to discuss it with Elizaveta."

"Obviously!" Anicka replied. "We'll let you two circulate."

Elizaveta and I moved off to talk to others, and about an hour later, the bishop arrived. Once he was settled in a chair in the shade, a long line of people who wished to ask for his blessing formed. About fifteen minutes after the bishop arrived, Viktor, Gennady, and two other men from church called out that the burgers and hotdogs were ready. Once the bishop had blessed the food, everyone sang *Many Years* to me and to my friends who had graduated. When they completed the song, Elizaveta and I helped ourselves to hamburgers, chips, pickles, and cookies, then went to sit with the other clergy and their families.

"Subdeacon," Vladyka ARKADY inquired, "if I ask you to wear your «подрясник» (*podryasnik*) at all times, would you prefer a grey one or a blue one?" ("cassock")

"I think, Vladyka, with your blessing, I'll defer to the young woman sitting on my left!"

The bishop, Fathers Nicholas and Herman, Deacon Vasily, Protodeacon Seraphim, Subdeacon Alexi, and the matushkas all laughed.

"Very wise, Subdeacon!" Vladyka ARKADY replied. "Elizaveta?"

"Blue, Vladyka," she replied.

"So be it. Father Nicholas, please make those arrangements when you order the epimanikia and the new *orar*. I also intend to grant the *ryassa* for Mischa to wear when possible."

The way he said that implied something I hadn't considered -- that he intended for me to wear my «подрясник» (*podryasnik*) -- the inner cassock similar to the black one I currently wore in church -- at all times, including while at school. And to wear the *ryassa*, or outer cassock, at other times.

"Vladyka, is it your intention that I wear the «подрясник» (*podryasnik*) while at school and in the hospital as well." ("cassock")

He nodded, "Yes. I've decided that with the exception of positions which require uniforms or manual labor, clergy should dress as clergy, at least for the major orders. Father Deacon Vasily now wears his «подрясник» (*podryasnik*) under his lab coat, and I would expect you to do the same. Obviously when you are required to wear surgical garb, you do so, or if a situation does not allow the «подрясник» (*podryasnik*) for medical or safety reasons." ("cassock")

I nodded, "Yes, Vladyka."

That was certainly going to draw some interesting reactions from my friends. It was also going to likely draw reactions from my professors and my fellow students, but I fully understood the bishop's position. The canons were quite clear and, if strictly applied, would have applied the moment I accepted tonsure

as a reader. In modern times, that had relaxed, and now it was just the major clergy who were expected to follow the canons for clergy dress in public, which, until now, had only been strictly enforced for priests. Of course, I thought with a silent laugh, my wardrobe decisions would be simple -- «подрясник» (*podryasnik*) or scrubs! ("cassock")

"Vladyka, how would that work at the beach, for example?" Elizaveta asked.

The bishop laughed, "My clergy are permitted to enjoy life! I usually suggest wearing the *ryassa* over your bathing clothes and removing it when you reach the place where you spread your towels. That is what I did on my trip to Greece several years ago."

"Wait!" Elizaveta gasped. "You were in a bathing suit?!"

The bishop laughed again, "Yes, my child, I, a bishop of the Holy Church, enjoy the beach and the sea as much as the next man! One of the Antiochian bishops was accused by some of the ultraconservatives of impiety because he chose to swim in a pool with a youth group. If one acts with decorum, there is no reason one cannot swim, or bowl, or ice skate, or ski, or do any other thing which is not forbidden by the canons. Pope John Paul II has been photographed on skis! And in some pictures, he is wearing normal ski garb. While we obviously don't take direction from him, it shows that one can maintain decorum while enjoying oneself!"

"I apologize, Vladyka," Elizaveta said meekly.

"For what?" he replied gently and with a soft smile. "Asking your bishop a question? You made no accusation."

"Thank you."

"I would like you to spend some time with Matushka Nicole, please."

That was Protodeacon Seraphim's wife, and I was sure the point was to help Elizaveta adjust to the major changes in her life, the first of which would occur in about twenty-four hours and the second in August when I was ordained.

"Yes, Vladyka," Elizaveta replied. "As soon as we return from Europe, I'll get in touch with her."

She and Matushka Nicole, a pretty blonde woman of about thirty, exchanged a friendly look across the table.

"So, Fathers," the bishop said with a twinkle in his eye, "what do you say about Barsanufius as a clerical name for Subdeacon?"

"I think 'Deacon Barney' is a PERFECT name!" Father Herman replied, trying to keep a straight face but unable to contain his laughter.

Elizaveta looked scandalized, and I realized she had never heard the bishop joke or tease, which was what he was doing now. I reached down and took her hand and squeezed it, trying to convey to her that everything was OK.

"Are you sure, Vladyka?" Father Nicholas asked. "I was thinking something more like «глупец» (*glupys*), as that is what his closest friends, including Natalya Vasilyevna and Clarissa, have called him for years!" ("blockhead")

I chuckled, "And deservedly so! In fact, I believe Elizaveta was of the same opinion when she finally had had enough of my behavior and came to demand I marry her!"

"Because you WERE a «глупец» (*glupys*)!" Elizaveta declared feistily, causing the bishop, the clergy, and their wives to laugh. ("blockhead")

"And there you have the last word on the matter," I replied, causing the men to laugh again and the women to smile knowingly.

When we finished eating, the bishop left, accompanied by Subdeacon Alexi and his wife, and Elizaveta and I took a walk along the lake.

"You've never heard the bishop and his priests joking and teasing, have you?"

"No! I was shocked!"

"I was as well the first time I heard him do that. He's careful to only do that with his clergy so as not to cause a scandal. You are the wife of one of his clergy; or will be in about twenty-four hours!"

"What do you think about wearing your cassock all the time?"

"I think I'll follow the bishop's direction," I replied.

"That's not what I asked, silly!"

"I think it's going to be interesting. I'm not sure how the professors and students will react, or patients, for that matter. But you know if it creates a problem, he'll modify the rule because he said 'medical or safety' reasons would create an exception. Vladyka is no ogre, nor is he a strict ascetic. He told you that when he said he went swimming in a bathing suit!"

"That's just SO weird to imagine!"

"Which, by the way, is why you don't discuss anything you hear when he's speaking privately to clergy with anyone else. It might well cause a scandal. I

suspect he wouldn't swim with parishioners around, but you never know; he might do that to make a point."

"That he is like the rest of us?"

"Exactly. Around the house, I'll wear shorts and T-shirts, but keep the *ryassa* handy in case there are visitors. That's what Father Herman did when I was growing up and what Father Nicholas does. There is no problem with relaxing and being comfortable at home; none of us are celibate clergy or monastics!"

"And tomorrow night, you will prove that to me!"

"Repeatedly!" I replied firmly.

Elizaveta shuddered and squeezed my hand. The anticipation was building, and I continued to wonder if either of us would survive our wedding night!

We completed our walk and returned to the party, doing our best to talk to as many people as possible before we had to leave so we could change clothes for church. We went first to Doctor Blahnik's house, where I changed into black slacks and a black polo, then to Elizaveta's house, where she changed into a white skirt and pale yellow blouse. We headed to church, where I put on my cassock, and for the first time, Elizaveta and I stood together during Vespers.

Following Vespers, the men from the church gathered in the church hall, along with Dale, José, Gene, Robby, and Lee, for my second bachelor party. The bishop joined us, though I knew he would leave early.

"Mischa!" my godfather Alexandr Vikhrov exclaimed, greeting me with a typically Russian bear hug.

"Alexandr Ivanovich!" I replied. "It's been a long, long time!"

"My, how you have grown," my godmother, his wife, Yelena, declared, hugging me and giving me a kiss on each cheek.

"I believe the last time I saw either of you was when I was thirteen. Did you get a chance to meet Elizaveta?"

"No. We only arrived from New York in time to walk in just as Vespers was starting. Yelena is going to join the ladies at the Kozlovs', so she'll meet her."

"I think I should go right away," Yelena said, making a point of looking around the room, "I'm in the wrong territory right now!"

I chuckled, "I believe that to be the case!"

"Before I go, I apologize for missing your graduation ceremony," she said. "We simply could not get away before this morning. We will be at your graduation from medical school, I promise! That is the more important one, I believe."

I nodded, "It is. And I'm glad you're here!"

"Thank you! And we've already booked our flights for your ordination. We would never miss that!"

"I appreciate it," I replied.

"And, now, I'll make my escape!" she declared.

She turned and walked to where Mrs. Sokolova was standing by the door of the church hall, and the two of them left to go to the Kozlovs' house.

"I'll make sure your dad and Paul stay away from each other," Dale said quietly.

"It won't be a problem," I replied. "Paul isn't looking for trouble, and he'll probably only stay for an hour or so. He doesn't know many people here, but I see him talking with James and Basil, two of the college students."

"So, Mischa!" Mr. Ipatyev said gleefully, "tomorrow night, you shall know the wonders of marriage, but tonight, you shall drink with us!"

"Andrei," Valentin, Elizaveta's grandfather, said, putting his hand on Mr. Ipatyev's arm, "Mischa will be a doctor and needs to limit his drinking."

"Bah! It's the night before his wedding and four years before he becomes a doctor!"

"Andrushka, he'll drink toasts with us, but the bishop will not be happy if we get him drunk."

"You know the tradition, Valya!"

"Yes, but he's already ordained, so the rules are different."

"Andrei Romanovich," I said gently, "I will drink with you, but I simply cannot get drunk."

He nodded and poured us each a glass of vodka, we touched our glasses, and he downed his in one gulp while I took a sip. He rolled his eyes, poured himself another glass, which he drank while I sipped mine, and then a third time. If every man insisted I drink three times with him, even sipping, I'd be twenty-three sheets to the wind, not three! I decided my best bet was to stay close to the bishop so long as he was at the gathering, so I went to sit at the table where he was sitting with several of the men who served on the Parish Council.

That gave me some reprieve until the bishop left, and the party kicked into high gear. Several of the older men brought out balalaikas, and the next several hours were full of singing, dancing, and a lot of drinking. I managed to limit myself to what amounted to three shots of vodka over the course of the evening by sipping when others drank. I also made sure I ate plenty of pickles and heavily buttered black bread, a known preventative against hangovers and a way to limit the effects of the alcohol until my system burned it off.

Dale and I left just after midnight to head back to Doctor Blahnik's house. He'd refrained from drinking the final two hours to ensure he was sober enough to drive. When we arrived, I was surprised to find Jocelyn waiting for us.

"You know we couldn't let this weekend pass without a trio being together," Jocelyn said.

She went to the kitchen and came back with three frosted mugs, three bottles of A&W Root Beer, and a carton of vanilla ice cream.

"I figured this is better than vodka!" Dale grinned. "And I couldn't think of anything more fitting than root beer floats!"

Jocelyn made us each a root beer float, and then put the ice cream away. We took our floats to the great room and sat on the rug in front of the dormant fireplace in a small circle.

"To our trio!" Jocelyn said, raising her glass.

We clinked the heavy, frosted mugs together and drank, then set the mugs down and began eating the ice cream with long-handled spoons.

"This will probably be the last time we're together for a long time," she said.

"The end of an era," Dale replied. "I suppose it's my fault for going to Madison and now to Seattle."

I shook my head, "It's nobody's fault. Remember what I said today? We have to be true to ourselves, and that meant you were always going to leave and that it would have been a mistake to stay just for us. It would have been an equally big mistake for me to leave this area."

"Something I discovered too late," Jocelyn said with a deep sigh. "Had I stayed..."

"Think about that for a moment, Jos. What would have happened had you stayed?"

"You're talking about Gene's point about the brittle nature of our relationship?"

"Yes. Perhaps, had we slept together at fourteen or fifteen, things might have been different, but I don't think so. I believe that road led to the same place for exactly the reason Gene said. We weren't ready for the challenges which came our way. It wasn't your fault or my fault."

"And the stuff you said in your speech about mistakes and hurting me?"

"A direct result of not having any real adversity in our lives. Dale, do you remember even one second of true adversity?"

"Besides not being able to get laid!" Jocelyn interjected.

Dale and I laughed.

"Leaving that aside," he grinned, "no. And that left us basically defenseless in the face of true adversity. Hell, I never really had any in Madison, either. You two

got it in spades. That said, when all is said and done, I believe you're both in a very good place."

"Going back to you and me, Jos," I said. "Do you remember the conversation we had with Tasha and Clarissa? And what Tasha said?"

"That we hadn't had an adult relationship, and we couldn't because of all the things that happened after the accident. Which is the same basic thing Gene said."

I nodded, "Yes. And I think that goes for the trio, too. We need to figure out how to be an adult trio. We started that day Dale, Clarissa, Liz, and Clara forced us together. That was Dale telling us to 'grow up' and act like adults instead of little kids."

"Dale was at the end of his rope!" he declared. "His two best friends were basically sworn enemies, or if they weren't, were acting that way."

"Mike was never my enemy," Jocelyn said quietly.

I took a deep breath and let it out, "Don't be so sure. That Christmas gift? The one you returned? I'm pretty sure I subconsciously chose a gift I was positive you would return so I could blame you for everything when I had at least as much blame for what had happened as you did, if not more."

"I have a proposal," Dale said.

"It's a bit late," Jocelyn teased. "Mike is getting married tomorrow!"

"As I was saying," Dale continued, ignoring Jocelyn as best he could, "I propose we agree that what happened in the past stays in the past, and we move forward."

No more rehashing; no more 'blame game' one-upmanship; no more 'what might have been'. Just Jocelyn, Mike, and Dale."

"I wish AT&T had actually managed to build those picture phones they advertised in the 60s," I said. "That would be a cool way to stay in touch."

"It'll happen eventually," Dale said. "There is a lot of cool technology coming in the not-too-distant future. You should ask your friend who's going to Stanford about that. The area near there, where HP, Apple, Xerox, and other companies have research and development, is going to change the world. Boeing is working with a bunch of technology companies, and some of the stuff I'm hearing about, which I can't discuss, will blow you away."

"I agree to your proposal," I said.

"Me, too," Jocelyn agreed.

"Good. And both of you, put the rest of it behind you; whatever happened in the past, leave in the past. Not just with each other, but with everyone and everything."

"Not an easy thing to do," I replied.

"But you will do it."

"Yes," I agreed.

"Yes," Jocelyn agreed.

"Then," Dale said firmly, "let's finish our valedictory root beer floats so Mike can get to bed. Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of his life!"

LXVII. The Dance of Isaiah

May 26, 1985, McKinley, Ohio

On Sunday morning, I decided to walk my usual route through Doctor Blahnik's neighborhood rather than run. I had nervous energy I needed to burn off, but I didn't want to burn off ALL my energy. I put on my shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes and went out the front door. I was surprised to find Clarissa sitting on the steps, waiting for me. She hopped up, and we exchanged a hug.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Waiting for you! Ready?"

"For?"

She laughed, "I'd ask for cuddles, but I know the rules."

"You don't run with me," I said. "So why come now?"

Clarissa smiled, "Because you aren't going to run! I know you well, Petrovich! You planned to walk because you're nervous, and you don't want to run because you don't want to expend too much energy today."

"Did you install some kind of mind-reading device into my head while I was sleeping?"

"It comes with the engagement ring you gave me!" she teased.

She slipped the small 'promise' ring I'd given her, which she wore on a chain, from inside her blouse so I could see it, then slipped it back inside.

"I didn't realize we'd gotten engaged!"

"You gave me a diamond ring, and we had a honeymoon!"

"But no wedding," I countered and walked down the steps.

Clarissa followed me down the walk to the sidewalk, and we turned right.

"Of all the things we could have done wrong, Petrovich, that would have taken the cake. I was wrong about being 'Petrov-sexual', and we both know it. As much as I wanted to be with you, it would never have worked. On the other hand, there is nobody besides you who could have helped me come out and allowed me to be who I really am. I love you for that, Mike. And for everything else."

"I love you, too. Last night, I promised Dale and Jocelyn that the past is in the past, and we'll move forward. Not just me and Jos, but everyone."

"I think that's good."

"You, too, Lissa."

She smiled and nodded, "Deal. So, how are you feeling?"

"You hit it right on the head when you said 'nervous'," I replied.

"How did things go with Jocelyn and Dale? Other than the pact?"

"Really well. I think everything is in place for a successful future for all of us. I'm not under any delusion that our lives will be problem-free or that everything will

be smooth sailing, but all the pieces are in place. Dale has a good job with Boeing, albeit on the other side of the country; Jocelyn and Gene are basically a permanent item; you and Abby are a couple, and I think she's 'Miss Right'; Sandy, you, and I got into the same medical school, and Fran will be with us, too; my sister is happily married to a man who loves her; and I'm getting married in about eight hours."

"Where do you think the trouble will arise?"

"If I knew the answer to that question, we could avoid it! But there will be something!"

"Elizaveta told us last night that the bishop said you have to wear your cassock at all times, even in medical school and when you can at the hospital."

"He said that's what he wants, yes, but there was a very large loophole -- medical or safety reasons."

"I can't imagine you trying to finesse that or play 'rules lawyer'."

I chuckled, "That was a great phrase we heard from Gene. I never realized he played *Dungeons & Dragons*!"

"I think he kept that quiet because the rest of us aren't really into games and because of the stigma. So how do you feel about having to wear your cassock all the time?"

I shrugged, "I don't care if anyone knows I'm clergy, though you know I'm not one to advertise under normal circumstances. It'll make me stand out, and you know my feelings about THAT. But that's actually the point, I think. We're supposed to be 'set apart', and nobody should be ashamed of being clergy. Did

she tell you that Tasha's dad now wears his grey cassock under his lab coat at the pharmacy?"

"No. That's new, right?"

"Yes. The bishop changed his ruling on that for clergy who have secular jobs -- so long as the cassock doesn't interfere with their jobs, then they should wear it. Before, it defaulted to not wearing it; now, the default is to wear it. I'm OK with that, but even if I wasn't, I'd follow the bishop's instructions. That's part of the deal I'm signing up for.

"That said, I wasn't expecting to be granted the *ryassa*. That's the more flowing black robes that you see Father Nicholas wear in public. Usually, that is only for priests or celibate deacons, but traditionally, it was for all clergy when they went out in public. It provided warmth and kept the «подрясник» (*podryasnik*), or inner cassock, clean so that when you put on your liturgical vestments, they weren't soiled by street grime. ("cassock")

"Basically, I'll wear the «подрясник» (*podryasnik*) at all times, though it'll be light blue, rather than black, and when I'm anywhere but school or the hospital, I'll wear the *ryassa*. There are lightweight Summer ones and heavier Winter ones, and, if it gets really cold, there are jackets called *kontorasson* which may be worn both under, or instead of, the *ryassa*. I'll have to ask about that before Winter." ("cassock")

"It's going to be weird seeing you in your cassock all the time. What about running?"

"Proper athletic attire is always permitted, and the bishop even mentioned going to the beach in Greece. Elizaveta almost lost it when he talked about that and when he made some jokes. And you know not to repeat this."

"I do. The price I pay, if you will, for you sharing everything is keeping my mouth shut! Another question -- will you get one of those cool hats like the deacon from the Cathedral has?"

I shook my head, "That's very unlikely. In the Russian tradition, those are usually only awarded to protodeacons or archdeacons. Deacon Vasily doesn't wear one. I mean, it's possible I'd be given one, but that is a very rare honor. Father Herman wears one, but Father Nicholas hasn't been awarded one. And don't ask me why because that is up to the bishop!"

"So it's like a reward?"

"It's what we would call an 'ecclesiastical award'. Basically, the bishop can award medals to laymen or things like the hat or the *ryassa* to clergy. The Antiochians, for example, only award the pectoral cross to archpriests as an ecclesiastical award, whereas all our priests wear pectoral crosses by default. The same goes for some of the additions to the priest's vestments, such as the «набедренникъ» (*nabedrennik*) or «палица» (*palitza*). The first is a rectangular cloth worn on the right hip; the second is diamond-shaped and is also worn on the right hip. If you get both, you move the «набедренникъ» (*nabedrennik*) to the left side. For the Greeks, they only do the second one but call it an «ἐπιγονάτιον» (*epigonotion*), and it signifies the priest is permitted to hear confessions. For the Antiochians, all priests get one."

(«набедренникъ» -- A square or rectangular cloth worn at the right hip, suspended from a strap attached to the two upper corners of the vestment and drawn over the left shoulder")

("«палица» -- a stiff diamond-shaped cloth that hangs on the right side of the body below the waist, suspended by one corner from a strap drawn over the left shoulder.")

"How the heck do you remember all of that?"

"I've been doing this for twenty-two years, Lissa! And in a sense, it's not all that different from military uniform regulations. It's all second nature at this point, just as it would be to someone serving in the military for a long time. And, by the way, if your goal was to distract me, you've done a very good job!"

"It was. If you were walking alone, what would you have thought about?"

"Seriously?" I chuckled.

Clarissa laughed, "OK, besides burying seven hard, thick inches in a tight, wet, willing virginal pussy!"

"You are SO bad!"

"Oh, please! You implied that!"

"I did," I agreed with a smirk. "Truthfully, I'd have been thinking about the gravity of what's happening today, along with the gravity of my ordination in August."

"Speaking of what's happening today, don't forget I need the balalaika. In fact, you don't have to be to church early today, so we have enough time to go get it and take it to my place so we can stash it in Abby's car."

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed.

We turned and walked back to Doctor Blahnik's house. I retrieved the balalaika, and then we headed towards the apartment Clarissa now shared with Abby.

"How is it living at Abby's?" I asked.

"Only having to share the bathroom with one person is a really nice benefit!"

"That was a really nice part of being RA, that's for sure. Feeling at home?"

"It'll take some time to totally sink in, I think, but yes, it's home."

"How did things go with your parents?"

"OK. I invited them to the lake, but they decided to go back to Sylvania."

"I take it Abby sat with Sophia, Robby, Lee, and the others at graduation?"

"She'd be the LAST person my parents would want to sit with. But I'm OK, Mike. I have Abby, you, and all our friends. As I said, if their little fiction keeps the peace, I'll accept that, but I'm not going to change."

"As if you could! Is Abby awake?"

"Yes. We had breakfast before I came to find you. I know you can't eat this morning."

We arrived at what I was now thinking of as Clarissa's place and went inside. I said 'Hi' to Abby, Clarissa put the balalaika on the bed in the second bedroom, then we left to walk back to Doctor Blahnik's house. When we arrived, Clarissa and I hugged and she headed back home while I went inside to shower and then dress for church. Jocelyn arrived with Gene to pick up Dale, as they'd decided to attend church with us. After a quick hug from Jocelyn, I left to pick up Elizaveta.

When I arrived at her house, she opened the door and gave me a quick kiss.

"Tomorrow morning, it'll be a MUCH better kiss!" she said dreamily.

"I promise to find a VERY interesting place to kiss, too!" I teased.

She closed her eyes, sighed, and shuddered, and said breathlessly, "Tonight, husband!"

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yes!"

We walked to my car, and after I helped Elizaveta into the passenger side, I walked around and got in. After buckling in, I started the car, put it in gear, and pulled away, heading down the driveway.

"How was your party?" Elizaveta asked as I pulled out of the driveway.

"Other than having to fend off Mr. Ipatyev and his friends to avoid getting drunk, I had a good time. Your grandfather, Valentin, did a good job of explaining things, which helped. I do have to confess one thing about last night."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I can't dance Russian folk dances!"

Elizaveta giggled softly, "Did Protodeacon Seraphim try to teach you?"

"Yes, and I managed to fall on my butt enough times that he eventually gave up! Even with my karate lessons in the past, I don't have the coördination to do those dances!"

"Do you know the folk songs in Russian?"

"I heard most of them growing up. It was mostly the grandfathers who were singing and playing the balalaika."

"You never played?"

"My grandfather has one but never taught me, and you know my dad is Dutch," I replied.

That was true, but also deceptive, but I didn't want to give away the surprise. We rode the rest of the way to church in silence, and when we arrived, I donned my cassock, and we went inside. We each lit a candle before the icon of the *Theotokos*, venerated the icon of Augustine of Canterbury, who evangelized England and who was commemorated on May 26th, and then went to stand near the front on the right side of the nave to await the start of Matins. My family, Elizaveta's family, and our godparents arrived shortly after we did.

The bishop arrived a few minutes later and sat on his throne. He wasn't serving a hierarchical liturgy, though Protodeacon Seraphim and Subdeacon Alexi would serve with Father Nicholas. As Matins began, several of my friends came into the nave, and by the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, all of my closest friends were in the nave. When the services ended, Elizaveta left with her grandmothers, Tasha, and Alyssa, to go home and get ready for the wedding, while I went back to Doctor Blahnik's, where I was joined by Dale, José, Mark, Robby, and Lee for a pizza lunch.

"You guys would have been my groomsmen," I said. "But that's not something we usually do."

"The Greeks do," Robby said, "at least according to Sophia."

I nodded, "They've adopted some typically American traditions into their marriage ceremony, and there's nothing wrong with that. Their churches tend to

be bigger, too, and are better suited to that kind of thing. You could do it at our cathedral, but it would be tough at Saint Michael and even tougher at Holy Transfiguration. There really isn't enough room to have a procession or attendants."

"One of the men told me you can't have Saturday weddings," José said.

"Typically, no. You shouldn't have them during a Fast, or on a fasting day, or on Saturdays. But those rules are somewhat laxly enforced to accommodate American society. I can't imagine the bishop approving a wedding during Great Lent except *in extremis*, but otherwise, he's generally accommodating."

"And it always has to be in the church?" Lee asked.

"Always. I've never heard of «*ekonomia*» being granted for a marriage to be held anywhere else. If a married couple converts to Orthodoxy, quite often, the bishop will strongly suggest they have a crowning service, which is what you'll see today. That would be done for anyone who had a civil marriage for some reason. There was a Marine from Holy Transfiguration who married while stationed overseas. There was no Orthodox chaplain, nor was there a church close to the base, so when he came back home, he and his wife had a crowning ceremony."

"If there's a church with more complicated rules, procedures, and ceremonies than the Orthodox Church, I have no idea what it might be!" Dale said. "I've known Mike since second grade, and I still shake my head when he explains stuff."

"Do you go to church?" Mark asked.

Dale shook his head, "Not since I was little, really. I've been to Mike's church, well, both churches, and to Jocelyn's Lutheran Church, but that's about it since grade school."

"What time is your flight, Dale?" I asked.

"Last one out of Port Columbus -- 10:20pm. I just have my carry-on, so I can stay until about 8:30pm, which is after dinner, the cake, and some dancing."

"Don't worry about leaving then," José said with a smirk. "Dona got the idea that Elizaveta doesn't plan to stay at the reception one minute longer than necessary. It seems she's VERY determined to start her wedding night as early as possible!"

The guys all laughed, and I joined them. That was exactly what Elizaveta had told me, and I wondered just how long we'd be at the reception. One thing was certain, and that was no matter how determined she was to begin our wedding night, we couldn't leave the reception before the bishop did.

"Mike, which girl was Mikayla?" Dale asked.

"She was standing on the left side of the nave and wearing a red blouse and grey skirt and had her long, black hair pulled back in a ponytail."

"Not to be impolite, but..."

I laughed, "Yes. Very nice 'mammalian protuberances'."

Dale laughed, "Did your mom ever find out you have those albums?"

"She knew I had the Carlin tapes, but I don't think she knew I had those Zappa albums. I kept them in my closet on the shelf, not next to the stereo, and I don't believe she was a 'snooper'."

"What albums?" Mark asked.

"*Joe's Garage*," José answered. "It's a two-album set by Frank Zappa, who is pretty irreverent and generally not appropriate for mixed company."

"What's that Russian word, Mike?" Dale asked.

"«Некультурный» (*nekulturny*)!" I chuckled. "It means rude, uncultured, or uncouth."

"Which is probably too mild to describe Zappa!" José replied. "He and George Carlin are both like that."

"Mike mentioned he had those George Carlin tapes, and he also had Steve Martin's album, the one where he talks about his cat!"

"Doesn't Mike call Elizaveta 'Kitten'?" Mark asked.

Dale laughed hard, "And that 'cat' will absolutely be the best fuck he's ever had!"

Robby, Lee, José, and I all laughed hard.

"I think I missed a few things going to a conservative Bible church," Mark said.

"Those albums aren't exactly approved by the Orthodox Church," I replied. "But they are classic American humor. If you want, I'll lend them to you, though I strongly suggest you listen to them in private. Alyssa might be offended, so I wouldn't listen to them with her until you listen first, and maybe not even then. I can lend you either tapes or LPs."

"They're pretty raw," Robby cautioned. "Be sure you want to listen to them."

"He's right," Lee confirmed, "but I think you should."

When we finished our pizza, I went upstairs, trimmed my beard, took a shower, and then dressed in my black suit with a white shirt and a royal blue tie, which Elizaveta had selected. I put on a black belt and then my black wingtips. I double-checked myself in the mirror, then headed downstairs to where the guys were waiting. Dale had changed into his suit, while the others elected to wear the dress shirts and ties they'd worn to church earlier.

I gave Dale my keys, and the six of us left the house, with Mark riding with Dale and me and the other guys getting into Robby's car. Fifteen minutes later, Dale parked in the church parking lot, and once everyone was out of their cars, we headed into the building. We were greeted by Mr. Sokolov, who led us to the parish office. Elizaveta would wait in the small meeting room next door.

Dale poured me a glass of water from a pitcher on the table and handed it to me.

"Last chance to bail," he teased.

"She'd hunt him down and kill him," José laughed. "It would be a very short reprieve!"

"Him?" Robby laughed. "She'll kill Dale simply for suggesting it!"

"She's a pussy cat," I replied with a grin.

"Oh, right," Robby laughed. "I forgot that Russian girls are so meek and mild! You know, just like Greek girls!"

There was a knock at the door, and when it opened, Subdeacon Alexi stuck his head in.

"Vladyka would like to pray with you before the crowning," he said.

"We'll leave," José said.

"Vladyka said that you're welcome to stay."

"Mike?"

I nodded, and the guys stayed. A minute later, Vladyka ARKADY came into the church office. I asked for his blessing, and Mark followed suit.

"Good afternoon to all of you," Vladyka said. "We're going to pray a litany and then the first prayer from the betrothal service. If you wish, respond along with Subdeacon Michael and Mark with 'Lord, have mercy!' to each petition."

Vladyka said the prayers, and the six of us replied to each petition in unison and said 'Amen' at the conclusion of the prayer.

"I'm going to pray with Elizaveta now," he said. "I'll see you at the doors to the nave at 2:00pm sharp."

He blessed us, then left, with Subdeacon Alexi closing the door behind him. I sat down on the couch and did my best to relax, but as I'd predicted, my nerves were reminding me of just how momentous this day was. About ten minutes later, Mr. Sokolov came into the office with a lit candle. I got up, and he handed it to me, then all of us left the office and went to the narthex. Elizaveta came out of the meeting room wearing her beautiful white dress, her hair tied back with a royal blue ribbon which matched my tie, and carrying a taper. She was followed by Tasha, Alyssa, Mrs. Sokolov, her grandmothers, Oksana, and Serafima.

Elizaveta and I moved to the doors of the nave where Vladyka ARKADY was waiting with Father Nicholas, Father Herman, Protodeacon Seraphim, Deacon Vasily, and Subdeacon Alexi. Elizaveta stood just to my left, and our godparents took their positions behind us. Protodeacon Seraphim handed the censer to the

bishop, who held it high. I took a couple of deep breaths and slowly let them out, willing myself to relax, which, thankfully, I did, at least somewhat, just as the service began.

"Glory to Thee, our God; glory to Thee!" the bishop sang out, with the choir responding with the same refrain.

The bishop led us forward, towards the table which had been prepared in front of the *solea*, singing Psalm 127 with the refrain 'Glory to Thee, our God; glory to Thee!' following each verse. When the Psalm was finished, the bishop turned to face the assembled congregation.

"Brothers and sisters in Christ, we come today to join Michael and Elizaveta in the bonds of holy matrimony. This is no small undertaking, and while it is Michael and Elizaveta who are joined, it is the entire congregation who is bound by vows to assist them in their marriage in every way, to aid them in establishing a faithful, healthy, happy home which one day shall be filled with faithful Orthodox children. You must pray for them each day that they live their lives in accordance with God's will and that no scandal or reproach is brought upon them.

"Now, as Elizaveta is not yet eighteen, I must, according to the State of Ohio, confirm her parents' blessing on this union. Viktor Nikolay'ich, do you give your blessing that Elizaveta should be wed to Michael?"

"Yes, Vladyka," Viktor replied emphatically.

"And Yulia Valentinovna, do you give your blessing that Elizaveta should be wed to Michael?"

"Yes, Vladyka," Yulia replied firmly.

He nodded, then handed the censer to Protodeacon Seraphim.

"Do you, Michael, have a good, free, and unconstrained will and a firm intention to take as your wife this woman, Elizaveta, whom you see here before you?"

"I have, Vladyka," I replied.

"Have you promised yourself to any other bride?"

"No, Vladyka, I have not promised myself to any other."

"Do you, Elizaveta, have a good, free, and unconstrained will and a firm intention to take as your husband this man, Michael, whom you see here before you?"

"I have, Vladyka," she replied with a huge smile.

"Have you promised yourself to any other man?"

"No, Vladyka, I have not promised myself to any other."

The bishop then intoned, "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages." And the choir and congregation responded with a strong "Amen!"

Next, Protodeacon Seraphim handed the censer to Subdeacon Alexi, raised his stole, and prayed the Great Litany, with the choir and congregation responding to each petition with 'Lord, have mercy!'. This was followed by the first prayer of the crowning ceremony, which reminded us of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and Aseneth, Zachariah and Elizabeth, and Mary, who conceived by the Holy Spirit. The prayer concluded with the first blessing.

Through Thine unutterable gift and manifold goodness, Thou didst come to Cana of Galilee, and didst bless the marriage there, to make manifest that it is Thy will that there should be lawful marriage and procreation. Do Thou, the same all-holy Master, accept the prayers of us Thy servants. As Thou wast present there, be Thou also present here, with Thine invisible protection. Bless this marriage, and grant to these Thy servants, Michael and Elizaveta, a peaceful life, length of days, chastity, mutual love in the bond of peace, long-lived offspring, gratitude from their children, a crown of glory that does not fade away. Graciously grant that they may see their children's children. Preserve their bed unassailed, and give them of the dew of heaven from on high and of the fatness of the earth. Fill their houses with wheat, wine, and oil, and with every good thing, so that they may give in turn to those in need; and grant also to those here present with them all those petitions which are for their salvation.

Following this was the second prayer of the crowning ceremony, which, after reminding us that God had made Eve as a mate for Adam, included the second blessing.

For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh; what therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder. Do Thou now also, O Master, our Lord and our God, send down Thy heavenly grace upon these Thy servants, Michael and Elizaveta; grant that this Thy handmaid may be subject to her husband in all things and that this Thy servant may be the head of his wife, so that they may live according to Thy will.

The prayer continued with remembrances of the same Old and New Testament figures as the first prayer and then continued with the third blessing of the crowning ceremony.

Remember, O Lord our God, Thy servants, the groomsman and the bridesmaid of

the bridal pair, who have come together in this joy. Remember, O Lord our God, Thy servant Michael, and Thy handmaid Elizaveta, and bless them. Grant them of the fruit of their bodies, fair children, concord of soul and body. Exalt them like the cedars of Lebanon, like a luxuriant vine. Give them offspring in number like unto full ears of grain; so that, having enough of all things, they may abound in every work that is good and acceptable unto Thee. Let them see their children's children, like olive shoots around their table; so that, finding favor in Thy sight, they may shine like the stars of heaven in Thee, our God.

This prayer was followed by the 'Prayer before the crowning'.

O Holy God, Who didst form man from the dust, and didst fashion woman from his rib, and didst join her unto him as a helper, for it seemed good to Thy majesty that man should not be alone upon earth: Do Thou, the same Lord, stretch out now also Thy hand from Thy holy dwelling-place, and unite this Thy servant, Michael, and this Thy handmaid, Elizaveta; for by Thee is the husband joined unto the wife. Unite them in one mind; wed them into one flesh, granting to them of the fruit of the body and the procreation of fair children.

Father Nicholas handed the bishop the first crown, which was a replica of a Tsarist Russian crown and which was made from silver and adorned with jewels, with a cross at the top and an icon of Christ on the front. The bishop held it over my head and said the prayer.

"The servant of God, Michael, is crowned unto the handmaiden of God, Elizaveta, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

He placed the crown on my head, and Father Herman handed him the second crown, which was attached to the first by a long white ribbon, and he held it over Elizaveta's head.

"The handmaiden of God, Elizaveta, is crowned unto the servant of God,

Michael, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

He set the crown on her head, then made the sign of the cross three times, saying, "O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor," after each sign of the cross.

The *prokeimenon* and Epistle followed, with Subdeacon Alexi reading Ephesians 5:20-33, which was Paul's exhortation to husbands and wives. After the Epistle, Protodeacon Seraphim read the Gospel lesson, John 2:1-12, which recounted the wedding at Cana.

After the Gospel, Protodeacon Seraphim sang a litany, and then Vladyka ARKADY prayed another prayer of blessing.

O Lord our God, Who in Thy saving dispensation didst vouchsafe by Thy presence in Cana of Galilee to declare marriage honorable: Do Thou, the same Lord, now also maintain in peace and concord Thy servants, Michael and Elizaveta, whom Thou hast pleased to join together. Cause their marriage to be honorable. Preserve their bed blameless. Mercifully grant that they may live together in purity; and enable them to reach a ripe old age, walking in Thy commandments with a pure heart.

Another litany and the Lord's Prayer followed, and then Father Nicholas handed a large silver goblet, shaped similarly to the chalice, to the bishop. After Protodeacon Seraphim intoned, 'Let us pray to the Lord!' and the choir responded with 'Lord, have mercy!', Vladyka ARKADY said the prayer of blessing over the cup.

O God, Who hast created all things by Thy might, and hast made firm the world, and adornest the crown of all that Thou hast made: Bless now, with Thy spiritual blessing, this common cup, which Thou dost give to those who are now united for a communion of marriage. For blessed is Thy name, and glorified is Thy Kingdom, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages

of ages.

Everyone responded with "Amen!" and then the bishop handed me the goblet from which I sipped a bit of wine. I handed it back to him, and then he handed it to Elizaveta, who did the same thing. This was repeated twice more, and then he handed the goblet back to Father Nicholas. He took the censer from Protodeacon Seraphim and then led Elizaveta and me, followed by our sponsors, the Sokolovs, in the 'Dance of Isaiah'. We circled the table three times while the choir sang the appointed hymn.

Rejoice, O Isaiah! A Virgin is with child, and shall bear a Son, Emmanuel, both God and man: and Orient is His name; Whom magnifying we call the Virgin blessed.

O Holy Martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns: Entreat the Lord that he will have mercy on our souls.

Glory to Thee, O Christ-God, the Apostles' boast, the Martyrs' joy, whose preaching was the consubstantial Trinity.

We came back to stand in our original places before the table, and the bishop lifted the crown from my head, held it above me, and prayed, "Be exalted like Abraham, O Bridegroom, and be blessed like Isaac, and multiply like Jacob, walking in peace, and keeping God's commandments in righteousness."

He replaced the crown on my head, then took the crown from Elizaveta's head and prayed, "And you, O Bride, be exalted like Sarah, and exult like Rebecca, and multiply like Rachel; and rejoice in your husband, fulfilling the conditions of the law: for this is well-pleasing to God."

Once this was completed, he replaced the crown on Elizaveta's head and then prayed the final blessing of the service of crowning.

O God, our God, Who didst come to Cana of Galilee, and didst bless there the marriage feast: Bless, also, these Thy servants, who through Thy good providence are now united in wedlock. Bless their goings out and their comings in. Fill their life with good things. Receive their crowns into Thy Kingdom, preserving them spotless, blameless, and without reproach, unto ages of ages.

The dismissal prayers followed immediately, and finally, the choir sang "God grant them many years!" three times. And with that, Elizaveta and I were married! There was no 'first kiss' nor any introduction of the married couple, as that would have been inappropriate in the nave; they would come later, at the formal reception.

[The complete text of the Service of Betrothal and Crowning, along with the music, can be viewed here: <https://oca.org/PDF/Music/Marriage/marriage-service.pdf>]

I noticed the photographer for the first time just then and remembered that we would have a series of photos taken before we went to the church hall for our first reception.

"Congratulations, Mischa," the bishop said. "Congratulations, Elizaveta."

"Thank you, Vladyka!" we both exclaimed.

The Sokolovs removed the crowns from our heads and placed them back on the table.

"Now," the bishop said, "I believe some pictures must be taken if we are to avoid the wrath of your parents, grandparents, and godparents!"

We laughed softly, as did the Sokolovs. Elizaveta's grandmothers came forward

to direct, and for the next thirty minutes, we posed for pictures with nearly every possible combination of clergy, family, and friends. Finally, when the grandmothers were reasonably satisfied, we were allowed to go to the church hall, where we waited at the door so that the bishop could announce us.

"Brothers and sisters, please welcome Subdeacon Michael and Matushka Elizaveta Loucks!" he said in a booming voice.

There were cheers and applause, and the congregation once again sang *Many Years* to us. We spent the next hour greeting everyone. My paternal grandparents had not made it, but that had been expected, given my grandfather's health. I hadn't seen Angie, and when I had the chance to speak briefly with Doctor Mercer, I asked about her.

"She was here," Doctor Mercer said. "She arrived while you were standing at the doors and left the minute the singing was done. That was the agreement she made with Father Stephen."

"How is she?"

"She was calm. Beyond that, only time will tell."

"Thank you. I just wish I'd been able to say 'hello' to her."

"We thought it best that you didn't."

I nodded, "OK. Thank you for working with me on this. And I'm glad you're here."

She smiled, "Thanks. Come see me when you get back from Europe."

"I will."

"Before you go, let me introduce my husband, Sam."

He and I shook hands, and then Elizaveta and I continued circulating until about 4:30pm, when we thanked everyone for coming, bade them 'goodbye', and left the church building. I helped her into my car, then got into the driver's seat, buckled in, and started the car.

"Well, *husband*," she said with an inviting smile, "how soon can we leave the reception?"

"Not before the bishop leaves!" I replied with a grin as I pulled out of the church parking lot.

"We should just skip the reception!" she suggested.

"Your grandmothers would be VERY upset if we did that!"

"I don't answer to them now! Or to my dad! Only to you!"

I chuckled, "And I, like all clergy, answer to the grandmothers! As they say, the bishop fears no man but every grandmother! That'll be you someday!"

"You'll be a deacon, and you'll have to do what he says!"

"And do you think Vladyka ARKADY is so foolish that he would upset any matushka? That would be a quick way to cause all sorts of dissension amongst the clergy!"

"Well, THIS matushka wants to go to bed with her husband!" Elizaveta said fiercely.

"You will, «КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*). Soon." ("Kitten")

"Hmph!" she grumbled, crossing her arms.

"«КОТЁНОК» (*katyonak*)," I said with a grin, "I promise that once we leave the reception, for the next five days, I'll do nothing but make love to you, drive to and from the Clerk's office to get our certified marriage certificate, drive to and from Niagara Falls, and eat!" ("Kitten")

"Fine," she sighed.

I figured I could gain nothing by continuing that conversation, so I simply let it be. Elizaveta put her hand lightly on top of mine, which was on the stick shift, to show she wasn't upset. I was positive she was frustrated, having anticipated her wedding night for months. But she'd achieved her main goal about two hours earlier -- to become, both spiritually and legally, Mrs. Michael Peter Loucks.

We arrived at the Country Club about ten minutes later, and I pulled up to where two valets were waiting. I set the parking brake, put the car in neutral, and after the valet opened my door, I got out. Elizaveta got out when the valet opened her door, I walked around, took her hand, and we went inside as the valet drove off to park my car. A hostess led us to the small, private lounge where we were joined by our parents, grandparents, and godparents to wait until the remaining guests gathered and we could be introduced.

"Have one small drink with us," my grandfather said, producing a bottle of vodka.

There was no way I could turn him down, and when he poured the vodka into glasses which were waiting on a table, he only put a splash in one of them, which he handed to me. He handed a glass to all the men and raised his glass high.

"«Многая лета» (*Mnogaya leta*)! Many years!" he exclaimed.

We all drank and set our glasses down on the table. Viktor had warned them in advance that the Country Club would not take kindly to smashing the glasses on the floor, which was customary amongst the older men after a first wedding toast. It was about fifteen minutes before we were called and introduced to the waiting guests -- grandparents, parents, and godparents. Once we were seated, Subdeacon Alexi went to bring in the bishop, and when he entered, members of the choir from Saint Michael sang, "May the Lord preserve you unto many years," one time, the traditional way of greeting the bishop outside the church.

With the bishop in attendance, the party could begin. By agreement, our grandfathers would make the three traditional toasts. Everyone had three shots of vodka in a glass in front of them, though anyone under eighteen had 7-Up, except Elizaveta, who had vodka. Our glasses each only had about a quarter of an ounce of vodka compared to everyone else who had an ounce. My grandfather gave the first toast.

"«За жениха и невесту» (*Za zhenikha i nevestu*)!" my grandfather exclaimed in his booming voice. ("For the bride and groom!")

Everyone drank, and as expected, the shouts of «Горько» (*Gorko*) followed immediately. By Russian tradition, that was the signal for the newlyweds to kiss, and the kiss was meant to be deep and last a long time, so as to remove the «горько» (*Gorko*), or 'bitter' taste of the vodka. Elizaveta and I leaned close and exchanged our first kiss as newlyweds -- a deep, searing French kiss that made me want to leave the reception at that very second. We held the kiss for nearly two minutes, with the old men counting the seconds out loud before we broke it. ("Bitter")

The second toast was made by Elizaveta's paternal grandfather, Nikolay, was to our parents. Everyone drank, and the shouts of «Горько» (*Gorko*) followed once

again. We exchanged another sexy French kiss, and then the third toast was given Valentin, Elizaveta's maternal grandfather, to all the guests in attendance. For a third time, shouts of «Горько» (*Gorko*) followed, and Elizaveta and I kissed again. ("Bitter")

The waiters began serving our salads, and once everyone was served, the bishop stood and said the blessing, and everyone began to eat. Other courses followed, and when everyone finished eating, Elizaveta and I got up and went to the table where an elaborate wedding cake was waiting. We used a silver knife to slice the cake, then returned to our seats while the cake was cut and served, along with coffee or tea.

Once we finished our cake, Elizaveta and I went over to stand near the grand piano in the corner of the room, and Anicka came and sat down on the bench. She looked over, and I nodded, and she began the intro to *Up Where We Belong*. I took both of Elizaveta's hands in mine, looked deeply into her eyes, and we began to sing.

Elizaveta: Who knows what tomorrow brings; In a world, few hearts survive

Mike: All I know is the way I feel; When it's real, I keep it alive; The road is long, there are mountains in our way; But we climb a step every day

Duet: Love lift us up where we belong; Where the eagles cry on a mountain high; Love lift us up where we belong; Far from the world we know, where the clear winds blow...

When we finished the song, our guests erupted in a roar of applause and cheering, and Elizaveta and I exchanged a soft kiss. Clarissa made her way carefully to where we were, holding the balalaika to her side to minimize who might see it. Anicka got up and made her way back to her seat.

"Sit, please, «Котёнок» (*katyonak*)," I said, pointing to a chair near the piano.
("Kitten")

"Why?" she asked.

"You'll see; just sit, please."

She did, and Clarissa handed me the balalaika. Elizaveta gave me a curious look, and there was soft murmuring from our guests. I sat on a stool and began to play *Lara's Theme*, which I was sure came as a surprise to Elizaveta, who looked lovingly at me the entire time I played. I was sure everyone else in the room, save Anicka and Clarissa, was surprised as well, as no hints had been given to anyone. When I finished, I stood and handed the balalaika back to Clarissa as our guests cheered and applauded.

"That was beautiful," Elizaveta said, but she protested, "I thought you said you didn't play!"

"I said my grandfather hadn't taught me," I grinned. "But Anicka did, as a surprise for you and our grandparents and the other older men and women! I had to keep it a secret, or it wouldn't have been a surprise."

She smiled and nodded, and I took her hand, and we went to the dance floor where we had our first dance to a recorded version of *Up Where We Belong*, played by our DJ, Peter Sytsov. After our first dance, we sat down while our parents, grandparents, and godparents danced, and then the dance floor was open to everyone. That was the traditional time for the bishop to leave, so after we received his blessing, he left with Subdeacon Alexi.

The moment the bishop left the room, Elizaveta took my hand, and it was obvious she wanted to leave.

"We need to be polite and greet some of our guests," I said. "And then we'll go home."

She smiled, and we made the rounds, making sure to speak to Chancellor Evans, Father Jacobs, my godparents, Dale, and a few others before Viktor called on the assembled guests to sing *Many Years* to us once more. When they finished, we walked past the table piled high with wedding gifts which we'd open when we returned from our trip, and walked out of the Clubhouse. The valet saw us and went to get my car but returned with a car I didn't recognize.

"Wrong Mustang," I said, though I was salivating over the Black 1985 1/2 Ford Mustang SVO Turbo.

"No, it's not!" Viktor declared from behind me, surprising me as I hadn't noticed he was there. "This is your wedding gift from me."

"Thank you!" I exclaimed, stunned at the gift. "I don't even know what to say!"

"You've just said it! I'll have someone bring your old car to the house. We'll sort it out later."

"Actually, give the keys to Clarissa," I said. "Tell her I love her and that we're even. She'll understand."

"OK," he replied, a curious look on his face.

The two valets helped us into my new car, and I carefully checked the controls lest my new bride reprimand me for not doing as I'd instructed her when she got her new car. Once I was satisfied, I pushed in the clutch, moved the Hurst shifter into first gear, pressed the gas, released the clutch, and drove off.

"Did you know?" I asked.

"No!" she exclaimed. "I was just as surprised as you were! I half expected you to tell him it was too much!"

"I almost did," I replied. "But that would have offended him."

"You're giving your old car to Clarissa?"

"Yes. She needs a car and was going to buy one. That's kind of silly, given mine is perfectly serviceable; and honestly, I'd feel wrong asking her for money at this point."

"What did you mean that you and she were 'even'?"

"It's my gift to her for everything she's done for me. Without her, we wouldn't be here."

"You really do love her a lot."

"She's my best friend, and I'm glad you two get along."

"Me, too! When we get home, you need to wait in the living room, OK?"

"Whatever you say!"

"Just remember those words, *husband!*"

I chuckled, "They are the key to a long, happy life!"

We arrived at the house, I backed into my usual parking spot, and once I'd shut off the engine and set the parking brake, I got out and helped Elizaveta from the passenger seat. We walked around the house, through the gate, and to what was

now our home. I unlocked the door, pushed it open, then scooped Elizaveta into my arms and carried her inside. We exchanged a soft kiss, and I set her down.

"Wait here," she said breathlessly.

I nodded and watched as she went down the short hallway to our bedroom and shut the door. The door opened about ten minutes later, and about fifteen seconds later, she called my name. I walked to the door of the bedroom and stopped, stunned by the breathtaking vision in front of me. The room was lit by dozens of candles, and my new bride was stretched out naked on the bed, hands flat on her stomach, ankles crossed, smiling invitingly. The candlelight glinted off the sapphires in her choker and off the gold of her waist chain.

In a voice which was both sultry and demanding, she implored, "Come to bed, *husband.*"