

# COMING OF AGE



# Coming of Age

Book 4 of *A Well-Lived Life 3*

by Michael Loucks

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# I. Advice From My Best Friend

**January 14, 2002, Chicago, Illinois**

 Jesse

*"Who was better?" she asked sweetly.*

*"Kelly! No!" Angelina protested.*

*"What?" Kelly asked innocently. "I'm just curious who was better, Jesse or his dad?"*

*I groaned, immediately realizing who the 'older guy' had been, and suddenly I had no desire to be with Angelina. In fact, I had no desire to even speak to her until I could sort out my feelings.*

*"I'm going to go home," I said.*

*"Jesse, no!" Angelina protested.*

*"Afraid you don't 'measure up'?" Kelly sneered.*

*"Don't be a bitch!" Angelina growled. "Jesse, wait!"*

*I simply kept walking towards home and heard the girls arguing behind me. Two minutes later, Angelina ran up next to me.*

*"Jesse, stop!" she pleaded.*

*"I need time to think," I replied.*



*"I'm so sorry!" Angelina said plaintively.*

*"Just let me be," I insisted.*

*She stopped and I continued walking alone towards the house.*

When I arrived home, I dropped my book bag next to the door, got a drink of water from the filtered pitcher in the fridge, then went up to my room. I put on WXRT, changed from school clothes to sweats, and lay down on the bed. I really should have known better, because Birgit had offhandedly mentioned the cheerleaders who had sold candy to Dad, implying he'd been interested in them.

I honestly didn't care who he banged, but I DID care about not being involved with anyone he had been with. In the end, I couldn't undo what had been done, but I wasn't going to continue it, no matter how much I'd enjoyed being with Angelina. That said there was one thing which was humorous, and that was that Angelina had said I was bigger than the 'older guy' who I now knew was Dad. Of course, I didn't particularly care, but it *was* funny. The only downside was I could never make use of that information, as it would reveal what had happened.

I heard the doorbell, but I really didn't want to speak to Angelina, so I decided to just ignore it. Fifteen minutes later, I heard the door open, and knowing it was too early for either of my moms to arrive home, assumed it was Birgit. She came upstairs and stood at the door to my room.

"Libby is here and said she's worried about you. I guess Angelina talked to her."

"You knew, didn't you?"

"I guessed, but I only know for sure about Kelly, Kayla, and Kristy."

“What IS it with Dad?”

Birgit giggled, “He likes fresh, young pussy, especially virgins! And if they throw themselves at him, can you blame him?”

“I guess not, but...never mind. Is Libby here?”

“She’s waiting in the main house. Is it OK for her to come up?”

“Sure.”

“Before I get her, can I ask how you found out?”

“Kelly decided to be a bitch,” I sighed. “And now I can guess why.”

“She was jealous?”

Oh, I was sure she was jealous, but I also knew WHO she had cheated with. If Lee ever found out, there would be hell to pay.

“Partly,” I allowed. “But Lee broke up with her for cheating on him.”

“Holy shit!” Birgit gasped. “How long were Lee and Kelly dating?”

“Since October, after he broke up with Kimberly.”

“Whoa! And Kristy gave her V-card to Dad!”

“V-card?”

“Nothing,” Birgit said quickly. “Forget I said anything. Dad would *kill* me.”

"Fat chance of THAT," I chuckled. "Aunt Kara might ground you for life, or whatever, but Dad would just talk to you."

"He'd be disappointed in me, and that's worse than anything Mom could do."

"Before you get Libby, V-cards?"

Birgit sighed, "You can NEVER repeat this. The cheerleaders who are virgins all get V-cards to hand out to the guy who gets their virginity. Dad got Kelly's."

"And Angelina's, obviously. Is it some kind of contest?"

"I don't know the details. I'm really surprised Kelly didn't give hers to Lee."

"I'm not," I replied, shaking my head. "But I bet Dad didn't know, because of his rule about girls involved in relationships."

"She lied!" Birgit gasped.

"Or he didn't ask," I replied. "But either way, Kelly cheated on Lee and if he ever finds out who it was, there's going to be trouble."

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

"Yes, but Angelina is fourteen, though we're close in age so that's not really a problem. Not to mention the problems the thing between Dad and Kelly might cause for the hockey team if Lee blames me."

"Ugh. Let me get Libby for you."

"Thanks," I replied.

---

 Birgit

I left Jesse's room and realized I'd opened my mouth once again without thinking, and revealed something nobody, including me, should have known. I just hoped Jesse didn't say anything to Dad, because if Dad asked me how I knew, I'd likely be in huge trouble. And if Dad told Mom, or made me tell her, my life would basically be over until I moved out of the house. I put that aside in my mind, hoping Jesse kept my confidence.

It was no surprise to me when I figured out that Dad had been with the cheerleaders, because I knew exactly what he liked, as I'd just told Jesse - young, fresh, preferably virgin, pussy. I just had to figure out how to make sure mine was included! But that meant staying out of any trouble with Dad, because I would need every bit of luck and chance that Loki could provide, with Dad having no reason to be upset with me about anything else.

Of course, I couldn't have what I really wanted, no matter what, because the Wicked Witch of the West wasn't going to go away, and even if she did, Dad still had my other mom and Suzanne. I couldn't imagine either of them leaving Dad, and I knew he'd be very sad if they did. He'd be sad about my mom, but she was so annoying that...well, no, I couldn't even think that. I loved her, but...argh!

"Jesse said it's OK to go up to his room," I said to Libby when I walked into the great room.

"Do you know what happened?"

"Uhm, yes, but I already opened my big mouth too wide once today, so I think you should ask him that question yourself. The door is unlocked so just go in and go upstairs."

“Thanks, Birgit!”

Libby left and I went to start on my homework.

“What’s the crisis?” Suzanne asked when she came into the sunroom.

“Just the usual teenage relationship angst,” I said.

Suzanne laughed softly, “I am SO glad I didn’t date seriously before I met your dad!”

“Why didn’t you?”

Suzanne shrugged, “I’m not sure. Perhaps I somehow subconsciously knew I needed a man just like your dad and a situation like this, and it kept me from being interested in guys in any serious way until the universe brought your dad and me together on the plane.”

“Loki strikes again!” I smirked.

“You absolutely take after your dad in so many ways!”

“And he keeps you happy?” I asked, making a silly face.

Suzanne laughed and nodded, “Yes, but not just in *that* way. Your dad, for all his quirks, is a wonderful, loving partner who has helped me become the woman I want to be.”

“In spite of his quirks? Or because of them?”

“Both, I think,” Suzanne replied with a soft smile. “The quirks make him who he is, even if they do create a bit of unnecessary drama and excitement now and then. You’re very lucky to have him as a dad. All of you kids are intelligent and mature, and act more like adults than most of the adults I know. You have your dad to thank for that. And your biological mom, who is perhaps the most free-spirited person I know, and is absolutely the person I know who loves life the most.”

“And the one who is a pain in my butt!” I groused. “Uhm, pretend I didn’t say that!”

Suzanne smiled, “I think all little girls believe their moms are pains in the butt at times; big girls, too. Boys pretty much always think that from about the time they hit puberty. And they for sure find their dad to be a pain in the butt at times, too.”

Jesse certainly did, at least today. But Albert, Matthew, and Michael never seemed to have any trouble with Dad, and Eduardo never seemed to cause trouble for Matthew and Michael.

“I suppose,” I agreed. “But that doesn’t make it OK!”

“But it’s part of life, and we have to deal with it. Things do not always go the way we want them to, and part of being an adult is accepting that, and finding a way forward despite that.”

“You just said Dad isn’t an adult!” I giggled. “He has fits when things don’t go his way!”

“Only with the government,” Suzanne declared. “Nothing can make him see red like the government.”

"True, I agreed, though if he found out how I knew about the V-cards, he'd turn positively crimson.

---

 Jesse

"Hey, best friend," Libby said, stepping into my bedroom. "You OK?"

"I guess," I replied. "Close the door, please. And this is under 'best friend, cross my heart, hope to die' rules."

Libby shut the door, I sat up and leaned against the headboard, and Libby got into bed next to me.

"So?" she asked.

"Well, let's see, Lee and Kelly broke up because Kelly fucked my dad, though Lee doesn't know it was my dad she had sex with. To top THAT off, my dad got her cherry, not Lee. Angelina knows about Kelly and my dad, AND Angelina was with my dad, and Kelly knows about THAT, too."

Libby giggled, "Uhm, sorry. I shouldn't laugh. So your dad got both their cherries? I thought he wouldn't be with anyone who was in a relationship."

"I bet he didn't know, and I suspect Kelly didn't tell him because of some kind of pact amongst the cheerleaders to give out a V-card when they lose their virginity."

"I thought that was just a rumor!" Libby gasped. "It's true?"

"So it appears. Birgit implied Dad collected more than a few of them."



Libby laughed, "Of course he did! We all know your dad likes teenage girls! That's no surprise. Do you know anything more about what happened?"

"Not really," I sighed. "Birgit implied something about them selling Dad candy. I bet you anything they flirted with him and they offered. It's like the normal routine around here. How did you know something was wrong?"

"Angelina came to my house and said that you were really upset, and she thought it was a good idea if I came to talk to you. What happened? She wouldn't say."

"Kelly was being a bitch for some reason which I didn't know, but I do now. She asked Angelina who was better, me or my dad."

"And?!" Libby asked with a smirk.

"As if I waited around to hear the answer to THAT question!" I chuckled. "Once it was obvious they'd both been with my dad, and that was the reason Kelly and Lee broke up, I decided to come home."

"I thought you really liked fucking Angelina."

"I did! But the whole 'dad thing' is kind of a turn-off."

"I suppose I can see that. What are you going to do?"

"Hope to hell that Lee never finds out that my dad was the one who got his girlfriend's cherry. That could really mess up the hockey team, not to mention if Kelly really is as bitchy as she seems, she could tell someone about my dad and Angelina."

"They'd just deny it, right?"

“Probably, but that wouldn’t stop all the trouble. Sure, in the end, there wouldn’t be a case, but that would be after it was in the newspapers, and stuff. Not to mention what Angelina’s dad might do.”

“So, you’re breaking things off with Angelina?”

“It was never going to be more than just what my dad calls a ‘dalliance’.”

Libby giggled, “Don’t look now, Jesse, but you are more like your dad than you think!”

“Oh, I know,” I sighed. “But,” I smirked, “Angelina said I was bigger.”

Libby laughed loud and hard, “Just wow! She didn’t tell you who, just that you’re bigger?”

“She just said ‘an older guy’ and I figured that meant like a Senior or whatever.”

“OK,” Libby smirked, “now that we’re no longer lovers, I think I need to find out if she’s right and who’s better!”

“Please, don’t,” I pleaded.

“I was teasing,” Libby said soberly. “And it was probably not the right thing to say.”

“Though, if you did, and you told him not only that I was bigger, but that I was better, it might be worth it just for the comedic value!”

“Cool!” Libby giggled. “I’m glad you’re OK with it!”

“That is NOT what I said,” I protested, but with a grin. “I simply implied it would be amusing to see his reaction! Not to mention the fact that you and Karli are exclusive.”

“You know, she’s never been with a guy...”

“Kill me now!” I groaned.

“What if it was you?” Libby asked in a low, sexy voice.

“Oh, right, because I need even MORE drama in my life!”

“She’s not interested, anyway. Not at this point, and maybe not ever.”

“We’re only fifteen and sixteen, so it’s not like there’s a rush to find Miss Perfect.”

“Speaking of which, my dad *finally* agreed I could get my learner’s permit. I start Driver’s Ed in March. You’re getting your license on your birthday, right?”

“That’s the plan, though as with everything else around here, subject to change with little notice.”

“Are you OK?” Libby asked.

“Yes. I was just blindsided and wanted to get away from Kelly and Angelina until I had time to think it through.”

“I’m not saying you should change your mind, but is it really fair to Angelina to punish her for what Kelly said?”

"That's only a small part of it," I replied. "It's really about her and my dad. And you used the 'F' word!"

Libby laughed and shook her head, "Your family is so weird! I could say 'fuck' and nobody would blink! I say 'fair' and it's like the world ended!"

"Because when people say something isn't 'fair' they're usually whining about something that didn't go the way they wanted, without any regard to it being just or right, or whatever."

"OK, fine," Libby said, rolling her eyes. "Is it right to take it out on Angelina? It's not like she lied to you or did anything wrong."

"Except fuck my dad."

Libby smirked, "Think about this - she came to you AFTER she was with your dad, AND said you're bigger! I don't see how THAT is a problem! And you said she was awesome! And if your dad doesn't know, how does that hurt you? I think you're letting him back inside your head again! But in this case, knowing what you know, you could be inside HIS head!"

"Oh, HELL no! Of all the places I'd want to be that would be the last!"

"Your sisters' heads?"

"OK, make that fourth last!" I said very quickly. "But that doesn't stop Kelly from being a bitch or trying to cause trouble."

"I'm not sure breaking things off with Angelina helps. I mean, Kelly is going to be a bitch no matter what. That's her reputation."

"Lee didn't think so."

“When guys think ‘prime pussy’ is available, they’ll put up with a lot of shit.”

“True,” I grinned, turning to look directly at Libby.

Libby laughed, “Mine is ‘prime’ for sure! You seem like you’re in an OK mood.”

“I am, I just wanted to get my head on straight before I said or did anything.”

“Honestly, I think you worry too much about your dad, but if that’s a concern, then just ask the girls.”

“Oh, right,” I chuckled. “‘Before we go out, I need to know if you fucked my dad’. As if THAT is a good idea!”

“Just ask Birgit! She seems to know everything.”

“I’m not sure that’s better,” I said, shaking my head.

“You guys are buddies, right? I’m sure she would tell you and not give you grief.”

“I suppose. But I think sticking to Macrina and Adi makes sense.”

Libby laughed, “Like any red-blooded, all-American, teenage hockey player, if prime, Grade A pussy is available, you’ll go for it!”

“Perhaps,” I admitted with a grin.



## January 16, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

"Steve?" Liz asked on Wednesday morning over the intercom function of the phone, "Can you come to my office?"

"Be right there," I replied.

I left my office and when I entered Liz's office, I knew what it was about, as Bob and Sam were there.

"Who?" I asked.

"I repeat my advice that this is a bad idea," Bob said firmly.

"Who?" I asked again.

"Brett Mullens," Sam replied. "He printed it and deleted it, so I retrieved the file from the backups after reviewing the printer logs. It was in his network folder, and the logs show he's the only one who accessed it. You can take it to the bank it was him."

"Or someone with his user id and password," Liz offered.

"No," Sam replied. "Durham has the new key card access system installed on all workstations. He used his card."

"And if he did allow someone to use his card, that's a termination offense," Bob said. "Per Steve's insistence."

"Has anyone spoken to him?" I asked.

"No," Liz replied. "Stephanie was adamant that you decide how to handle this."

"It's obvious he has to go," I replied. "He's more than welcome to hold any idiotic beliefs he chooses, but he's not welcome to threaten to kill Muslim employees. And before any of you object to that statement I just made, remember he wrote that 'the only good Muslim is a dead Muslim'. How would YOU take it if he wrote, say, 'the only good HR head is a dead HR head'?"

"You'd probably defend that," Bob said dryly.

"Bob, your job is to make sure I don't shoot myself in the foot. It's a thankless job, and a difficult one, because I'm difficult. But don't ever think I'd threaten you in that way, or even think it. Whatever I might think about the policies we enact because you insist, that never translates to you personally."

"Sorry," Bob said. "I really should be used to it by now, but every time I think something is a 'no brainer' you beat my brains in!"

"You have the unfortunate task of being the messenger for a government which I distrust and despise, and that's not even taking into account the loathing I have for the Bush family! Anyway, the racist jackass has to go, and he has to know WHY he's going. And I want a crystal clear public statement as to why he was terminated."

"You know that's..." Bob began, "well, actually, in THIS case, because he did something public, you might get away with that. Liz?"

"A formal statement saying he was terminated for making public threats against Muslim employees would likely pass muster, though there is always a risk."

"Life is about managing risks," I replied. "I want to send a clear message. It's one thing to want Osama bin Laden brought to justice, it's a very different thing to blame what happened on September 11th on all Muslims. The country has already shifted too far to the right in that regard, and I fear it's only going to get



worse. That said, a right-wing police state and a left-wing police state only differ on the choice of enemies. I'm an enemy to both, and proudly so!"

"I think it's best if I write the notice," Bob said. "I can match your style and keep it within bounds."

"What?" I grinned. "No stocks and pillory?"

"From a personal point of view, I agree with you, believe it or not. This is the kind of thing that caused Japanese Americans to be rounded up and interned at Manzanar and other places."

I nodded, "Something for which my friend Sensei Ichirou will never forgive the Democrats for doing. When can you have a draft ready?"

"By the end of the day. I'll get it to Liz for her approval, then to you, and you can discuss it with your sister before it's issued."

"Over both Stephanie's and my signatures," I said. "Liz, please run it by the Board. No need to convene them unless they think it necessary. Email is OK."

"We'll take care of it," Liz said. "We should be ready to act on Friday."

"Who's going to do the termination?" Bob asked.

"Technically, it should be Cèlia or Mario," I said, "but I'm going to do it. Personally. If you want to babysit, you're welcome to fly down to Durham with me on Friday."

"I think I should, just to be safe."

"I'll have Kimmy make the reservations. Down and back the same day."

“OK,” he agreed.

Liz asked me to stay, so Bob and Sam left, with Sam pulling the door closed behind them.

“I just want to make sure you understand that if this were to go to court, the political environment will be heavily against us.”

“When is that NOT the case?” I sighed. “But I’m sure your right about this situation. Obviously, he has no First Amendment claims because it’s on my property, and I get to decide the rules. And I can certainly fire him for that asinine poster.”

“That’s absolutely true, but a skilled attorney will make it about the First Amendment and September 11, and that might be enough to sway a majority of a North Carolina jury. Remember, in a civil case, the jury need not be unanimous. And, as I know Jamie and others discussed with you, it often comes down to who the jury likes more. Putting Hazeem on the stand might actually lose the case, given the animosity for Muslims in general, and his beard and usual attire.”

“You obviously have a suggestion,” I said with a wry smile.

“Who? Me?” Liz said in faux protest.

“Yes, you.”

“You won’t like it.”

“Tell me what it is, and I’ll decide if I like it or not.”

“The best way to defend NIKA against a wrongful termination is for both NIKA and Hazeem to swear out complaints with the Durham Police and speak to the prosecutor there about it.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Shocking,” Liz said flatly. “But it’s the best possible defense. Turn him over to the government and let him be charged with a misdemeanor for making the threat. At worst he’ll pay a fine and do probation, and maybe have to perform some community service, but it will ensure he will have a nearly impossible mountain to climb to successfully sue us. And while I would never expect it to happen, it also fends off any potential civil rights claims Hazeem or another employee might make against NIKA.”

“That won’t happen,” I said. “But having him arrested flies in the face of just about everything I believe,” I replied.

“It’s either that, or take your chances in court,” Liz said firmly. “I don’t like it any more than you do.”

“Then why suggest it?” I asked.

“A lawyer’s duty is to be a forceful advocate for her client. I’m telling you how to be sure you’ll win if he were to sue.”

“You think he might?”

“I think there’s a good chance, yes. Think about what happens if he finds a friendly editorial writer who then discovers that, say, Hazeem attends a very conservative mosque, and his imam has said things which might be termed ‘Anti-American’. I don’t know that he does, because it’s not my business, but think how that plays.”

I laughed, "I say more things that might be considered 'Anti-American' than the average follower of Saul Alinsky!"

Liz laughed as well, "True."

"For what it's worth, Hazeem does attend a very conservative mosque," I said. "All of our Muslim staff do, except for Paramita. But so what? My son attends a church every bit as conservative, traditional, and hidebound as any mosque you can point to! Sure, the rules are different, but they are no less strict."

"And you know Christianity, even its most conservative forms, gets a pass from society, with very few exceptions."

"Westboro Baptist Church?" I asked.

"Those idiots, and, of course, you know how Mormons were treated."

"I'd argue Mormons aren't Christian, but gnostic. That said, even the Christians can't agree on who is Christian and who isn't. But I get your point. Let me think about it."

"You don't have a lot of time, unfortunately."

"It does make sense," I allowed after a moment's thought, "and if we do that, I'll want you to fly down with us. Make sure Sam preserves all the evidence."

"She did, and I have the flyer that was put up in the break room in Durham. Hazeem sent it to Bob and he gave it to me. I'll bring it with me on Friday, assuming you decide to go that route."

I sighed, "I hate the idea of turning someone in, but you're right about the political situation. A jury might find against us simply because we're protecting our Muslim employees from harassment."

"Say the word and I'll start the ball with the local prosecutor."

"The word," I smirked.

"There are times when you are such a little boy!"

"Thank you!" I said with a grin. "And thanks for protecting me."

Liz laughed and shook her head, "The opposite sex has no sense whatever when it comes to their limits. They must constantly be watched lest they harm themselves in the simple act of being men."

"Wow," I chuckled. "What did Julius do now?"

"Not him, you dope! YOU!"

"Oh," I smirked.

---

 Jesse

"Jesse, can I talk to you?" Angelina asked as I got in the line for hot lunch.

I'd been thinking about what to say to her, and I really hadn't come up with anything, but I knew I couldn't avoid talking to her, because I felt doing that would hurt her more than just being honest.

"Sure," I replied.

“Can I meet you at your house? I want to avoid Kelly.”

“I have hockey practice after school, then after dinner, I’ll be doing homework at Libby’s house. It’s probably OK if you stop by there.”

“OK,” she replied. “Where does she live?”

I gave her the address, and after we got our lunches, she went to sit with the cheerleaders and I went to sit with my friends. Libby and I exchanged a look, but she didn’t say anything, as we couldn’t really talk in front of Lee or Adi. After we finished lunch, Libby and I walked to our next class together.

“You’re going to talk to her?” she asked.

“I think it’s best. She’s going to come by your house after school. I hope that’s OK. If not, we can go somewhere else.”

“You can fuck in my bed if you want,” Libby teased.

“That is the ONE thing that is not happening today. She asked to talk and that’s what we’ll do.”

“Uh-huh. Talk.”

I rolled my eyes, “Yes, talk! And I don’t mean that in any euphemistic way!”

“We’ll see!” Libby teased.

I let it go because I knew she was just trying to wind me up, and I wasn’t going to allow that to happen. After our afternoon classes, I boarded a bus with the rest of the team so we could go to the rink for two hours of practice. After a good

practice, we showered, and boarded the bus for the ride back to school. When we arrived, I quickly walked home, ate dinner with my moms, then headed to Libby's house. I wasn't surprised to find Angelina waiting on the corner, despite it being cold out.

"Hi," she said, "I'm really sorry about what happened."

"It's not your fault," I replied. "Kelly should have minded her own business."

"She's such a bitch!" Angelina exclaimed. "I can't believe she revealed something that was supposed to be a secret. You understand why I couldn't tell you, right?"

"Yes, but now that I know..."

"You don't want to be with me again?" she asked plaintively. "I really like you and I really liked being with you. What Kelly told was a cheerleader thing."

"A competition?"

"A challenge, with rules."

"Would you tell me?" I asked out of curiosity.

"It had to be someone over eighteen, who we had never dated, who had never gone to Kenwood Academy, and who wasn't related to anyone on the cheer team. And the older the better."

"I hope nobody had to say who it was," I said. "More than half the team is under seventeen!"

"No, that part was on the honor system."



“How long has this been going on?”

“This is the second year. The funny thing is that it was my older sister’s idea, and she still has her V-card!”

I laughed, “Seriously? She can’t get anyone to do it with her?”

“She came down with mono last year, and the doctors told her not to kiss anyone until they were confident she’d recovered. And this year, I’m pretty sure she tried, but both times my parents changed their plans.”

“How did you manage?”

“I, uhm, can’t say. I don’t want to be like Kelly.”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s OK. Can I see you on Monday?”

“What about Kelly?”

“I think I can fix it if you agree to invite her to your party on Memorial Day. Can you get Lee to agree?”

“I think I can do that.”

“Then let me talk to Kelly. I’ll talk to you at school, OK?”

“Yes.”

Angelina hugged me, then left, and I went into Libby’s house to do homework with her and Adi.



## January 18, 2002, Durham, North Carolina

 Steve

“What’s going on?” Brett Mullens asked as he came into the conference room where Liz, Bob, and I were waiting.

“Have a seat, please,” Bob said firmly.

Brett sat down, looking very nervous. With a nod from Liz, I began.

“A picture of Osama bin Laden with a target on his forehead and a caption ‘The only good Muslim is a dead Muslim’ was posted in the break room. An employee reported this to us in Chicago, and after a complete investigation, we traced it to your computer. We have system logs and backups, showing it was stored on your network drive and printed from your computer. Access to your computer was with your user id and password, authenticated by your key card. You are hereby terminated immediately, for cause, for making threats against your fellow employees and creating a hostile work environment.”

“That’s bullshit!” Brett declared.

“The proof is incontrovertible,” Liz said firmly.

“So is the proof that nineteen asshole ragheads hijacked four fucking airplanes and flew them into buildings because ‘Allah told them to!’”

Any thoughts I'd had of mercy, or of finding a way out of the situation without involving the government, vanished in that instant. The thinking behind the ideas Brett was expressing were the very ones that had led to the internment of Japanese Americans and the odious Supreme Court ruling, *Korematsu v. United States*, which purported to declare that there was nothing unconstitutional about setting up concentration camps on the *chance* that someone might commit an act giving 'aid and comfort' to the enemy. There was no way I was going to stand for that. Period.

"I need your key card, ID, cellular phone, and laptop," Bob said. "Someone will collect your personal things from your desk and courier them to you later today."

"Fuck you!" Brett exclaimed.

"Steve?" Liz asked, getting confirmation that I wanted to proceed.

"Yes," I said firmly.

She picked up the phone and dialed an internal extension and simply said 'Confirmed'. Thirty seconds later, the door to the conference room opened and two uniformed police officers and a plainclothes detective came into the room.

"Brett Mullens, I'm Detective Ed Shaheen of the Durham PD. I'm placing you under arrest for making terroristic threats," the detective said. "Please stand up."

"What the fuck?" he screamed angrily. "I want a lawyer!"

"And you can have one once you're booked," the detective said firmly.

"Show me your warrant!" Brett demanded.

The detective held up a tri-folded sheaf of papers and said, "I have the warrant right here. I've also been in touch with the US Attorney who may press charges as well. Stand up, right now, and put your hands behind your back!"

For a brief second, I thought Brett might foolishly try to make a run for it, but in the end, he complied, was cuffed, read his rights, then was led away.

"I would have bet you would have relented on having him arrested," Bob said.

"As I discussed with Liz and the Prosecutor yesterday, I would have, if only he'd shown the slightest bit of remorse. The minute he called them 'ragheads', his goose was cooked, so to speak. I won't put up with that shit, period."

"Sending an Arab detective was a bold move," Liz replied.

"It's exactly what I would have done," I replied. "Think the charges will stick?"

"NIKA and Hazeem swore out state and federal complaints, but you know how the system works. I'm reasonably certain that he'll end up with a fine and probation after a plea bargain, and possibly some community service."

"OK. Let me call Kimmy so she can send out the memo, and then we can talk to the staff here."

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[Chicago, Illinois]

 Jesse

"There's nothing playing at the theaters we want to see," I said at lunch, "so I thought we could just hang out at my house. We have a bunch of DVDs that we own, some movies from Netflix, and my consoles. There's also the pool table and sauna at my dad's house. Everyone else will be out, so nobody will bother us."

“Who all is going to be there?” Libby asked.

“You, Karli, Adi, Kwame, Chenelle, Tim, Blake, Pete, Janelle, Lacey, and me. I figured we’d order Chinese from the place my dad usually orders. It’s great food and not expensive, and if we eat at my house, we don’t have to worry about getting a table or whatever.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Libby declared. “Will that be OK with your parents, Adi?”

“Will any adults be home?” she asked.

“My dad, eventually. He’s in Durham, North Carolina, but he’s flying back. He’s supposed to be home around 7:00pm.”

“Then I can tell my parents he’ll be there and it won’t be a problem.”

“What’s he doing in North Carolina?” Kwame asked.

“Firing an employee who put up a poster of bin Laden with a target on his head and with the caption ‘The only good Muslim is a dead Muslim’.”

“My dad agrees with that,” Pete said.

“What the fuck?” I asked “Adi is Muslim! Does he think SHE should be killed? And my friend Yusef and his family?”

“You don’t want to hear the other stuff my dad says,” Pete replied, shaking his head.

“What about free speech?” Humberto, the best pitcher on the school baseball team, asked.

"You know the saying, 'my room, my rules'?" I asked. "Well, my dad owns the company so he gets to make the rules. Not to mention you can be arrested for threatening someone. One way to look at it is that you can say anything you want, but that doesn't mean there won't be consequences like getting your dumb ass fired for saying you want to kill your Muslim coworkers!"

"Couldn't he be arrested?" Kwame asked.

"The government does frown on threatening to commit mass murder", I said, well, unless THEY are the ones who are planning to commit it! Then it's just fine."

Everyone laughed. We finished our lunch and headed to our afternoon classes.

## II. Meaning

**January 18, 2002, Chicago, Illinois**

 Jesse

“Hello?” Dad called out when he walked into the house on Friday evening.

“Just me and my friends,” I said. “Everyone else is out. Were you expecting the house to yourself?”

“No,” Dad replied, “and it’s not as if I can’t go into my study, or the bedroom. I did plan on a sauna.”

“We were going to use it later, but with ‘weekend rules’ because not all my friends are comfortable with the normal rules.”

“OK. I’m going to get a quick shower, have a bite to eat, then use the sauna. You saw I can’t make your game on Sunday right?”

“You’re giving away Liz, so, yeah, that has to take precedence. I don’t see anything on your travel schedule except Mayo and your weekend in Vermont. Does that mean you can make all the playoff games?”

“I should be able to, yes. We booked the weekend in Vermont after checking which weekends didn’t have any playoff games scheduled.”

“Cool.”

“Who all is here?”



“Adi, Libby, Karli, Kwame, Chenelle, Tim, Blake, Pete, Janelle, and Lacey.”

Dad went up to his room and I went back to the great room where we were just sitting down to watch *The Wedding Planner*. It was a movie Birgit had put on the Netflix list and it’s the one the girls wanted to see, so I had acquiesced. Adi and I sat together in the recliner, with her on my lap.

“I like being in your arms,” Adi said, snuggling close.

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 Steve

After a quick shower to remove the grime accumulated by sitting in a sealed aluminum tube for several hours, I went down to the kitchen to get something to eat. I fixed a small plate with salami, cheese, broccoli, celery, and radishes, poured myself a glass of ice water, and took my meal to my study so I could browse the internet while I ate.

There wasn’t much news of note, other than a report of a Canadian Pacific Railway train carrying anhydrous ammonia derailing in North Dakota, and an update on the crash of Garuda Indonesia Flight 421, which had only one fatality amongst the sixty passengers and crew on the 737.

Other things of note were editorials supporting and objecting to the detention of prisoners at Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay. My objection to it was that it seemed to me to be a transparent attempt to avoid giving US Federal Courts jurisdiction, and I was afraid that Bush would succeed in that attempt.

The final editorials I read before finishing my light meal were against the Patriot Act, and against Bush’s hare-brained No Child Left Behind Act, which was, in effect, a complete federal takeover of local schools. Setting aside my usual

objections to centralized power and the federal government interfering in things over which they had literally no authority from the Constitution, it was using a hydrogen bomb to kill a fly. Yes, there were some underperforming schools, but the plan put forth was going to remove all local control AND likely lead to a reduction in elections, and a likely end to art, music, and other courses which didn't teach towards the standardized tests.

I took my empty plate back to the kitchen, washed it, put it in the rack to dry, then went up to my bedroom once again to put on a bathing suit. Normally I would have just used a towel, but with the possibility that Jesse's friends would come into the sauna, I felt it was safer to just wear my bathing suit. Once I'd changed, I headed to the basement, realizing I'd be alone as the kids were in the middle of a movie.

I spent twenty minutes in the sauna, then rinsed off in the shower, went up to my bedroom to change into sweats, and went back to my study to play *Europa Universalis II* until my wives arrived home.

"Did you have him arrested?" Jessica asked after she, Kara, Suzanne, and I greeted each other.

"Well, he called Muslims 'ragheads' so what do you think I did?"

"You're not in custody, so you didn't beat him within an inch of his life, which means you did have him arrested."

"I'm not proud nor am I happy, but Liz and the Board all felt we needed to protect ourselves from the political climate. Given the public support for basically denying anyone we think is a terrorist any civil rights by sending them to our naval base at Guantanamo Bay is just fine, as well as massive support for the Patriot Act, I didn't see any real options."

“What’s happened to this country?” Jessica asked.

“People have decided to trade their liberty for the illusion of safety, and the government is following the authoritarian playbook by ensuring there is an enemy to distract the plebs from what’s really going on.”

“We’ve always been at war with East Asia?” Suzanne asked.

“Pretty much. Bush is not going to let the opportunity to feed the military-industrial complex and ensure massive profits for defense contractors pass unused, not to mention ensure control of Middle Eastern oil.”

“You hate him with a white-hot passion!” Kara declared.

“I do, but in this case, Gore would be doing the same thing, just with a slightly different spin.”

“Cynical as always!” Jessica exclaimed.

“That I am. How was your evening out?”

“Great!” Kara replied. “Ten women painting the town red! And tomorrow we’ll do it again for Girls’ Night Out!”

“I need to walk Jesse’s friends home before we to go bed,” I said. “Once the movie is over, they’ll have a sauna, then everyone will head home. I figure another ninety minutes or so. When will the girls be home?”

“Whenever Penny sends them back,” Kara replied. “Kathy took her girls with her when she went home, and so did April. It’s just our three there with Amber now.”

“Shall we relax in the sunroom until the kids are ready to leave?” I suggested.

The three women agreed, so we headed downstairs.

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 Jesse

“You really use this naked?” Karli asked after we’d all changed into bathing suits and gone into the sauna.

“Sure. But I know some of you aren’t comfortable with that, so that’s why we’re using what my family calls ‘weekend rules’ but which really apply anytime someone feels uncomfortable or doesn’t want to be naked.”

“With your parents and siblings?”

“Since I was a baby,” I replied. “But as I said, it’s up to each person, and if one person objects, then we use bathing suits or towels.”

“Weird.”

“My dad lived in Sweden and he basically adopted their view of nudity and of how to raise kids.”

“That’s why you’re basically free to do whatever you want?”

I laughed, “It might seem that way, and it might even technically be true, but that’s not how it works. I have to be responsible for anything I do, and be ready for the consequences. So I could do dumb stuff, but then I’d risk losing my privileges.”

“Man, I wish I had that kind of freedom!” Tim declared.

"You?" Lacey said, shaking her head. "I was barely allowed to come here tonight! I had to beg my mom to talk to my dad."

"Why?" Karli asked.

"Because my parents don't know Jesse's parents. I'm not usually allowed to go to anyone's house unless my parents have met their parents. But my mom convinced my dad it was OK because Jesse and Tim are on the hockey team and dad likes to go to the games."

"That's seriously uptight!" Blake declared.

"You have no idea about uptight," I said, shaking my head.

"Do your sisters have the same freedom?" Karli asked.

"Sure. My dad doesn't treat boys and girls any differently, though he does adjust things for each kid because each of us is different. I play hockey; my brother Matthew is in drama; my brother Michael is into robotics; my brother Albert is learning to fly."

"And your sisters?"

"They all take karate lessons and do whatever girl stuff they do that I do NOT want to know about!"

The guys all laughed.

"What's wrong with girls?" Janelle asked.

"Nothing!" I declared. "I'm just glad I'm not one!"

“Oh, please! Like being a boy is a good thing?”

“It is!” I declared.

“We can pee standing up!” Blake declared.

“Of *course* it’s about your dick,” Karli exclaimed, shaking her head. “It’s ALWAYS about your dick!”

“And,” Libby smirked, “with a pussy, I can get as many dicks as I want, AND have the guys eating out of my hand to get it!”

“She has a point,” Kwame said.

“Nah,” Tim declared, “not if you don’t want it! Then they have ZERO power!”

“Leaving aside Tim’s observation,” I smirked, “girls want to fuck just as much as boys do, they’re just unwilling to admit it!”

“He actually has a point,” Janelle giggled.

“That’s because society is messed up!” Libby said. “Guys who have lots of sex are ‘studs’, but girls who have lots of sex, or even WANT to have sex, are ‘sluts!’”

“I hope nobody here thinks that,” I said. “Everyone has read Bethany’s book, right?”

“Which book?” Janelle asked.

“*Smart Teens; Smart Choices*. If you haven’t read it, I can give you a copy before you go home.”

“What’s it about?” Janelle asked.

“Everything you could possibly want to know about your body and about sex, including instructions and diagrams!”

Everyone laughed.

“Which is NOT the main point!” I declared. “It’s really about having a healthy attitude about sex and that teenagers having sex is a normal part of growing up. There’s a ton of information about birth control that you would never hear in school, as well as pretty much everything you need to know about puberty, diseases, and pregnancy.”

“My dad would have a heart attack!” Janelle declared.

“So don’t show him the book!” Libby declared. “You’re sixteen, and you have an absolute right to know everything you need to know about your body and sex. It’s not up to your dad, or your mom, or the school; it’s up to you”

“Exactly,” I said.

We finished our sauna, took individual showers, and I got a copy of the book for Janelle from Dad’s study. Then, due to the rules my moms had set, I went to find Dad so he could walk with us. At Adi’s house, I got a nice ‘good night’ kiss, and after we left the last house, I contemplated discussing the situation with Angelina with him, but decided, in the end, it was better to just let it go.



## January 19, 2002, Naperville, Illinois

 Michael

“Are we ready?” Mr. Perez asked?

“Yes,” Joe said. “I verified that all the controls work.”

“And I verified that all the electrical connectors are tight,” Andi said.

“And there are no problems with the body,” I said. “We’re ready.”

“Good,” Mr. Perez replied. “Manuel, are you ready to drive?”

“Yes! Mike, Joe, and I practiced with our lightweight prototype for three hours yesterday.”

“Our strategy is sound, Mr. Perez,” Andi said. “We’re going to win!”

We left the small classroom which was our ‘ready room’ and went to the auditorium where the arena had been built thanks to Eduardo’s company, who had made a big donation. He and Dad had also provided most of the money and resources to build our bot. They played the national anthem, then announced all the schools that were participating - Oswego, Naperville North, Naperville South, Plano, Yorkville, Aurora East, Aurora West, and Plainfield.

First up would be Yorkville against Plainfield, and we’d be last in the first round, facing Plano, so I went to sit with Dad and Eduardo, and Andi sat next to her dad, who was sitting next to Eduardo. Matthew, Albert, and Jesse were there to watch, as was my mom, but my sisters had zero interest in robots.

“Who’s your real competition?” Dad asked.



“I think Aurora East,” I said. “Their JROTC unit built their bot and they got help from some Navy guys.”

“I think I might have to have words with some of my Navy friends!” Dad declared.

“Yeah, good luck with THAT,” Matthew laughed. “Navy men stick together!”

“I hate to say it,” Eduardo said, “but Matthew is right.”

“Just advice, right?” Jesse asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “Except for using the grinder or welding, we had to do all the actual work.”

“What traps are there?” Albert asked.

“A spike trap, a flipper, a ramp, a hammer, and there are also two piston-rams on the center pillar, which can spin. They’re randomly controlled by a computer.”

“No fires or saws?”

I laughed, “The Fire Marshal said no explosions or fires, and the schools felt a saw was too dangerous.”

“What happens to the arena when you’re done?”

“Eduardo’s company will make it available to other schools who want to do the same kind of competition. Saint Charles is already looking at doing something

because they have a CNC/CAD program. They'll be tough to beat, just like Aurora East."

The competition started and the two bots went after each other, but neither could disable the other, and in the end, Plainfield won on points, having made more successful strikes against Yorkville. The second match was no contest, with the Aurora East robot using its spiked ram to disable the Naperville South robot in less than a minute.

"I'm so glad we used a sloped design," I said. "That spiked ram won't easily penetrate it."

"Yeah," Joe agreed, "but Naperville lost because they let Aurora trap them against the wall and hammer them with the spike. Their bot looks a bit heavier than ours, and if they can trap us, or shove us onto the flippers or spikes, we'll be in real trouble."

The third match went nearly the whole time, but just before the end, the Aurora West driver made an error, and the large hammer slammed his bot, breaking one of the wheels, giving Naperville North the win. That meant it was time for our match, so we went to the 'ready room' and Manuel and I carried our bot to the arena and set it in the starting position which was marked on the floor.

Plano's bot was designed to ram other bots, and didn't have very many moving parts, which made it simpler to drive, and harder to destroy. After a quick discussion between Joe, Andi, Manuel, and me, we decided on a strategy - a quick, long, high-speed run across the arena with a goal of flipping the Plano bot onto its back. If Manuel could time it right, and the Plano driver couldn't avoid the contact, we'd win in a few seconds.

When the buzzer sounded, Manuel drove as fast as he could, angling just to the right of the center pillar, as the Plano driver had made a slow move to that side.

Manuel surprised him, the front of our bot got under the Plano bot and flipped him, but their bot bounced off the side of the arena and landed on its wheels. That gave us five points, but their bot was still alive.

The next three minutes were spent with both teams maneuvering for position while trying to avoid the traps, but then Manuel executed a perfect deceptive move and managed to shove the Plano bot into the center pillar just as the rams came out and it started to spin. That didn't disable the other bot, but it turned its back to ours, and Manuel simply drive right under it, hit the buttons for both pistons, and the Plano bot landed upside down to give us the win.

We had fifteen minutes to make any necessary repairs, but there was nothing wrong with our bot, so we simply checked all the electrical connectors and lubricated the pistons for our match against Plainfield. In the end, it was an easy match because their hammer was disabled by the hammer trap, and Manuel simply shoved the bot into the corner and held it there long enough to win. In the second semi-final match, Aurora East made short work of Naperville North, setting up a match between us and Aurora East for the championship. There was a fifteen-minute break before the consolation match was supposed to begin, but Naperville North couldn't repair their damage, so Plainfield took third by default.

"What do you think?" Manuel asked as we checked over our bot.

"I think we're in trouble," Andi said. "Their bot is low, like ours, so we're not likely going to get under them, and their bot is heavier, so we're not likely going to be able to shove them around. Both of us have sloped sides, but that actually works to their advantage as their front ram is so strong."

"We're more maneuverable and faster," I said. "So I think you just do your best to stay away from them and look for an opportunity to score a few points. If you let them get a run on you, the way we did in our first match we're toast."

“What if we try to lure them to a trap?” Andi suggested. “You know, make it look like they can get a run on us, but move at the last second?”

“It’s worth a shot,” Joe agreed. “But you have to time it perfectly.”

We were still discussing our strategy when the bell rang signaling that we had to carry our bot to the arena. When the buzzer sounded, Manuel carefully maneuvered to stay out of a straight line from the Aurora East bot, and avoided the traps, but never managed to get into a position to attack without having to take a big risk. After a minute of basically running away, he got our bot into position to try to lure the Aurora East bot to the spike trap. It almost worked, but the spikes only struck a glancing blow on the other bot.

Manuel maneuvered to escape, but had to dodge the ramp that popped up, giving Aurora East a chance to ram us. They only got a glancing blow, and our sloped sides saved us. A quick maneuver by Manuel allowed him to strike the East Aurora bot in the side, not doing any damage, but scoring a point. Moving quickly away, Manuel maneuvered for another try, but had to dodge the center pillar which started spinning and that gave Aurora East an opening. They went into reverse, and pushed us against the wall, and Manuel couldn’t break free before the referee declared Aurora East the winner.

“Neither of us could damage the other,” Andi observed. “We need to rethink our strategy and figure out how we could damage them.”

“What about a lift?” I asked. “You know, a plate that basically rides just above the floor with internal arms to lift, once it slides under, like a spatula.”

“I’m not sure it could lift the weight,” Joe observed. “But we have a year to design a solution.”

We watched as Aurora East was presented the championship trophy and medals, then received our second-place trophy and medals, and, finally, Plainfield received their awards for finishing third.

“You guys did a great job,” Dad said when we met after the awards ceremony.

“Thanks! Did Mom tell you about the robot skills competition in May?”

“Yes. I’ll be there!”

“Cool! See you for Guys' Night tonight!”

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[Chicago, Illinois]

 Albert

CmdrAlbert: Hi!

WarriorChick: Hi! What’s up?

CmdrAlbert: Coming to Chicago anytime soon? I feel the need...the need for speed!

WarriorChick: 🙄 Sorry, I can’t bring a jet!

CmdrAlbert: Bummer!

WarriorChick: How about Presidents' Day weekend? I can fly out on Friday evening, we can fly cross-country on Saturday, stay the night somewhere, then fly back on Sunday. I can fly home on Monday.

CmdrAlbert: Excellent!

WarriorChick: Make sure you check with your dad because we’ll be gone overnight.

CmdrAlbert: I will. You know Dad will be cool. And Mom isn’t as crazy about stuff as she was.

WarriorChick: She loves you!

CmdrAlbert: Oh, I know! But moms are a pain!

WarriorChick: At least you have one.

CmdrAlbert: Two, but sorry.

WarriorChick: One thing you'll learn in the Navy is that no matter how much you complain, it won't change anything. So you suck it up, do whatever you need to do, and then find a way to change it. Sometimes you can, sometimes you can't. And if you whine at the Academy, you're going to have a terrible time there.

CmdrAlbert: I wasn't whining!

WarriorChick: So you say! 😎!

CmdrAlbert: We'll play Ace Combat when you're here and I'll wax your six!

WarriorChick: Big talk, little man!

CmdrAlbert: If you want to win, you can play with Dad!

He'll CFIT or hit some high voltage lines!

WarriorChick: Check with him and let me know!

CmdrAlbert: Wilco! Over and out!

I got up from my computer and went to find Dad who was setting up for Guys' Night.

"Aimee plans to fly out for Presidents' Day weekend," I said. "She said we could fly cross-country on Saturday, stay overnight somewhere, then fly back on Sunday. She'd stay until Monday. Is that OK?"

"Yes," Dad replied. "Put it on the calendar, and make sure you let your mom know when she gets home from work. Your moms, Suzanne, and I will be in Vermont, so I probably won't see Aimee. Where are you going to fly?"

"We didn't discuss it, but I'll pick a couple of places, check with Aimee, and then practice the flights on my simulator."

"Sounds like a plan. Just keep me posted."

"I will. Thanks, Dad!"

I went back to my room and started scouting flights, and then it hit me that we could fly to Cincinnati to see Grandpa Adams, Uncle Jake, and his kids. That would let Aimee visit her dad as well.

CmdrAlbert: How about Cincinnati? I can see Grandpa A, Jake, and his kids, and you could see your dad.

WarriorChick: That works! Are you going to practice?

CmdrAlbert: Obviously.

WarriorChick: OK. See you then! Make sure you let everyone know.

CmdrAlbert: Yes, Ma'am!

WarriorChick: At ease, sailor! See you in a month!

CmdrAlbert: Cool! Over and out!

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 Steve

"You look tired, Babe," I said when Jessica came out of the ER.

"A multi-car pileup on the Dan Ryan. We had six, and saved them all. One person was DOA at the accident site. Astrid's company was the first one to be on-site, but they ended up with three companies responding. We ended up treating her and another firefighter for smoke inhalation, but nothing serious."

"Do you know what happened?"

"A semi blew a tire, a car swerved to miss the huge chunks of rubber, and then it was like a pinball machine. Mercy got the minor injuries, so I'm not sure how many total victims. And that was in addition to our usual heart attacks, male stupidity, and uninsured people with minor ailments."

"Which brand of male stupidity today?" Kara asked.

“UofC student trying to crush a beer can against his forehead. A contusion and a nasty lac.”

“I never did anything even remotely like that growing up!” I protested. “And your son is far too squared away to try anything like that!”

“True,” Jessica agreed. “Or at least as far as I know!”

Of course, I *had* become involved with the Outfit, which wasn’t exactly the brightest thing I’d done, but Jessica had no knowledge of that, and if I had my way, never would.

“He actually wasn’t like that,” Kara said. “He was too busy deflowering virgins and programming to have time to do any of the usual dumb boy stuff!”

“Oh, I heard he did PLENTY of ‘dumb boy’ stuff.”

“True,” Kara smirked, “but that was usually about fucking, not about trying to show off for his buddies!”

“The most dangerous thing I did in High School was date Melanie!” I chuckled. “And she would agree with me!”

“And nothing has changed! You’re still deflowering girls and programming!”

I chuckled, “Which fits Liz’s contention that men are just boys with more body mass and more money!”

“She has a very good point!” Jessica declared. “Before I forget, how was Michael’s robotics competition?” Jessica asked.

“They finished second to Aurora East’s JROTC team. It was close, though.”



“When we get home I’m going to take a quick shower then take a twenty-minute power nap as I did during my first year of Residency. I still plan to go out with the girls.”

“Whatever you need, Babe.”



## **January 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois**

“I’m sorry I’ll miss Liz’s wedding,” Jessica said as Kara and I walked her to the hospital on Sunday morning. “I spoke with her last night and apologized.”

“She knows you have limited options and none of us want you to make a bad trade to get an afternoon off. And you’re going to be at the reception, because it doesn’t start until 7:00pm at Bucktown Bistro.”

“Hopefully today won’t be like yesterday. But I’ll plan to meet you there so you aren’t late if I’m delayed.”

“Did you get enough sleep, Jess?” Kara asked.

“Yes. You know we didn’t get in too late last night because you and I chose not to stay for drinks after the last set at the House of Blues.”

“Did Albert talk to you?” I asked.

“No, but I saw the entry on the calendar.”

“He’s going to take Al with him,” I said. “They talked about it last night. That way Al can spend some time with my dad.”

“And Albert can show off for his grandpa!” Jessica said with a soft laugh. “He’ll be in his element. What do you have planned today, Tiger? I mean, before the wedding.”

“Mentoring sessions with Sarah and Hope. We pushed Philosophy Club until next week. Jesse did the same thing with their Hangout because he has a hockey game today which, unfortunately, I have to miss. He’s cool with it, because I make most of his games, and I won’t miss any playoff games.”

We dropped Jessica at the hospital, then Kara and I walked home together. She went to the kitchen to make breakfast with Suzanne while Birgit and I cuddled. After breakfast, I spent time with my daughters until Sarah arrived.

“Sorry about my crazy schedule,” I said when we sat down side-by-side in my study.

“It’s no sweat! I’m very happy for the time you can give me.”

“How are things going with your parents and Michelle?”

“Fine. I actually went to her church last night for Vespers. I met the girls at the Blues Club afterwards.”

“What did you think?”

“Roman Catholic on steroids!”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“It does fit her personality perfectly, though. I could never do it. She said you attended quite often in the past.”

"I enjoyed the rituals, and the worldview has much to say for it, but my family situation was seriously problematic. As I've said before, I'm syncretistic and eclectic, and I can incorporate some of their wisdom into my worldview. How did you leave things with her?"

"We're going to see each other in a couple of weeks. My mom called, too, and I guess that went OK, but my dad is still being an ass. To me, too."

"Work with your mom, and let her work on your dad, if she can. I developed a very good relationship with my dad, but my mom, well, at best it's a cease-fire. Changing topics - how are classes going?"

"Great! And things with Myles are moving in the right direction. His schedule sucks, but we're working around it."

"Good. Honestly, it sounds to me like we can take these sessions to 'as needed'," I said. "Assuming you're good with that."

"I think so, because I'm coming to the Philosophy Club, which basically is the same kind of thing, just not personalized. I can use our one-on-one sessions to focus on any areas where I need individual help."

We went to the kitchen for tea, and about ten minutes later, Hope arrived. She poured herself some tea, I refilled my mug and then, after saying 'goodbye' to Sarah who was leaving to see Myles, Hope and I went to my study.

"How did your talk with Kara go?" I asked.

"Fine, I suppose. She couldn't actually articulate why she felt the way she did any more than I can articulate why I feel the way I do about you, beyond the chemistry concept we discussed last time."

“That’s not surprising, really.”

“She did say that I should let my feelings guide me, but to be careful. She described a mistake she made, though without any names, and the impact that had on your relationship.”

I nodded, “It led to our ‘Year in the Wilderness’. I don’t think you’re in the same situation, though, because you don’t have the same conservative moral framework.”

“I suppose that’s true, which would mean I’d need more of a guide than a protector.”

“Or, you just want to have a threesome,” I chuckled.

Hope laughed, “Possibly!”

“Are you anywhere close to that point?”

“No. I’m still not sure. I am positive I like heterosexual sex, but I am SO curious about being with a girl...”

“Then you have to make sure that it’s what you want, and that your partner, whether it’s Kailey or someone else, knows you’re just experimenting.”

The phone rang and I excused myself to answer it.

“Steve? This is Nelson Scanlon. Melissa asked me to call you and let you know that we had a baby boy we’ve named Martin Nelson. He’ll have Melissa’s surname.”

“Congratulations! I take it both are doing well.”

“One is exhausted and uncomfortable, the other is crying to beat the band, so yes, both are doing well!”

I chuckled, “Nice. Tell Melissa I’m very happy for her, and that my daughters will expect to see Martin as soon as he’s able to travel.”

“Will do.”

We said ‘goodbye’ and I hung up.

“Who’s Melissa? I mean, if I’m allowed to ask?”

“She and her brother own M&M Engineering, an important business partner.”

“OK, that explains why I haven’t heard her name, let alone met her. I mean, I’m sure there are friends I’ve never met, and probably some I’ve never heard of, but a personal call says there’s a close relationship.”

“She and I have worked closely together for about a decade, and she used to spend a lot of time here, mostly for mentoring.”

“Ah!” Hope smirked. “Got it.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t comment, but in this case, I’ll comment - that never happened because we didn’t want to mess up our business relationship.”

“Interesting. That’s the first time I think I’ve ever heard you say that having sex with someone close to you would mess up the relationship.”

“There have been a few other instances,” I replied, “but they are few and far between. And we’ve discussed the usual path to bed.”

“Mind-fucking before physical fucking.”

“There are some people who shouldn’t be mind-fucked, and others who couldn’t handle it. But it’s also possible for the mind-fuck to lead to non-sexual intimacy. That’s happened a few times, and is likely to happen more often in the future.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“In the Fall, I’m going to basically do what amounts to professional mind-fucking sessions for the medical school. They’ll be called ‘critical thinking seminars’, and are a direct result of working with one of Jessica’s medical students.”

“Emilee, right?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting. I thought you two had...hmm, I may have to adjust my thinking. I simply assumed...well, oops!”

“Things are not always as they appear,” I replied. “That said, you based your conclusion on the information at hand. As with any judgment call or conclusion, there are always unknowns. You just discovered some that will alter your thinking, and potentially change your conclusions in the future.”

“I’m curious about something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why do you think there will be more non-sexual intimacy? I mean, sure, you probably shouldn’t fuck your students, as it were, but it’s not like there’s a lack

of girls who would be happy to have their brains fucked out by an expert! Hell, there are likely plenty of virgins in the Freshman class at UofC, and probably plenty of Sophomores, too."

"I didn't say *none!*" I protested with a smile. "Just fewer. And it's not like I'm lacking opportunities for sex!"

There was a knock at the door and I called out for whoever it was to come in.

"Pardon the interruption, Steve-sama," Yuriko said, "but lunch is ready."

"Thank you, Yuriko-chan," I replied.

She left and closed the door.

"'Sama'? 'Chan'?" Hope inquired.

"'Chan' is used for close friends. 'Sama' is used as a sign of respect. She should use 'san', which is a sign of respect amongst equals, but she's too traditionally Japanese to do that, even here. She'd prefer I use 'kun' but that is more for a master/servant or teacher/student relationship."

"I have the impression, from some things Kara said, that there's a very special girl in Japan, not all that different from Liz, Natalie, or Samantha."

"It's all about timing, but, ultimately, I think each of those relationships developed exactly as they needed to, and provided me with exactly what I needed at the time. I believe all three women would agree that the reverse is also true. None of our lives would be complete without the other, but we also weren't meant to be together the way Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, and I are."

"Meant to? As in fated, or the universe is deterministic?"

“More in a sense that our paths towards enlightenment necessitated it, even if it wasn’t predetermined. Could we walk those paths without the experiences and the relationships? Sure. But someone or something would have to provide the experiences and the opportunities for growth. If not them, then others, but perhaps not nearly as impactful, making the journey longer and more difficult.”

“I swear, every time I talk to you, you peel away another layer of the onion, and make me think even more! This time it’s about past and future relationships, and the meaning they have in my life.”

I nodded, “Yes.”

Hope sat back, her eyes went wide, and she nodded, “OK, *now* I understand why *You’re the Inspiration* is your song. ‘You give meaning to my life’ is the basis for every single one of your relationships, isn’t it?”

“If you understand that, you’re well on your way along the path.”

We left the study and joined Kara, the kids, Suzanne, and Natalie for a lunch served by Yuriko.

“Steve-sama, I will draw a bath and bathe you before helping you dress in your tuxedo. I confirmed with Kara-sama it’s OK.”

“Oh, puh-lease!” Brigit groaned, shaking her head.

“What is wrong, Birgit-chan?” Yuriko asked. “I wish to do these things for your father!”

“I think I’m going to have to talk to Jane!” Albert declared.



“Good luck with THAT!” Ashley giggled. “If you want that, you need a Japanese girl!”

“Hmm,” he grinned.

“I have her on IM!” Ashley declared mirthfully. “I’ll let her know!”

“I don’t believe that’s a good idea,” I said. “Funny, sure, but not a good idea.”

“I was just teasing,” Albert said.

“Uh-huh,” Ashley smirked. “You would LOVE to have someone wait on you hand and foot and cater to your every need!”

“He’s not the only one!” Birgit declared forcefully.

“Good luck with that, Sis!” Albert exclaimed. “I feel SO sorry for whoever has the misfortune to marry you!”

“Children,” Kara warned. “Let’s not take silly teasing to insulting, please.”

I saw Birgit roll her eyes, but because she was sitting to Kara’s right, Kara didn’t see it, which was good for Birgit, because had Kara seen it, it would have ignited the ‘cold war’ which was still going on between them. We finished our lunch, and while the kids cleaned up and washed the dishes, Yuriko bathed me as promised, and helped me dress.

“You look very handsome in your tuxedo,” she said, once I was dressed.

“Thank you.”

“And thank you very much for the invitation to the wedding and the reception. I very much appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome! Now, I need to go find Kara and Suzanne so we can be on our way.”



# III. Wagging Tongues

**January 20, 2002, Chicago, Illinois**

 Jesse

“Are you doing anything tomorrow?” I asked Macrina after church on Sunday morning.

“Going to my mom’s brother’s house in Rockford. I want to see you again, but Dad is being a pain in the butt, and hockey and church make weekends difficult!”

“I know, which is why I was hoping you were free tomorrow.”

“I can probably see you next weekend. I asked Mom about coming into the city and she said she’d drive me, but someone would have to bring me home. When is your hockey game?”

“Saturday morning at Johnny’s Ice House. If your mom brought you to the game, that would work.”

“I’m sure Mom would be OK with that, because it’s even closer.”

“And what did you want to do?” I asked, suspecting I knew the answer.

“Have you poke me with your big stick as much as possible!”

“I think that can be arranged,” I replied with a grin.

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 Steve

“Gorgeous!” I said to Liz when I greeted her at the chapel.

She was wearing a royal blue dress which perfectly complemented her black hair, and which showed off her sexy body without being immodest.

“And you look amazing in your tuxedo!”

“Julius is a very lucky man.”

“And so are your wives! Well, lucky women!”

I chuckled, “Every bit as pedantic as I am!”

“Yes, but my pedanticism required me to be trained! You’re just that way naturally!”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing!”

“Are you ready?” Elyse asked. “The judge and Julius are waiting for you.”

“Ready if you are,” I said to Liz.

“Let’s do it!”

“That might not be a good idea,” Elyse smirked.

“Behave!” I declared.

“Oh, that’s rich!” Liz said with a soft laugh. “You telling someone to behave! Well, besides Penny!”

“Or Birgit!” I added. “Shall we?”

We left the room and went to the front of the chapel where Julius was waiting with a judge from the Cook County Circuit Court who had agreed to do the wedding of the two lawyers, telling Julius that he was happy to ‘keep it in the family.’ The ceremony was very quick, lasting less than ten minutes, which was about half the time it took for the photographer to take the pictures of Liz and Julius, as well as Liz and her friends, Julius and his friends, and, with Julius agreement, Liz and me.

“Thanks, Steve,” Liz declared. “See you at the reception in a few hours!”

“We’ll be there! Jess appreciates you scheduling it so she could attend.”

A couple of hours later, Kara, Suzanne, and I arrived at Bucktown Bistro. We were a bit early, but that gave me a chance to flirt with Sam and chat with Alex.

“You Americans love your wars on inanimate things,” Alex said. “War on Crime, War on Drugs, War on Terror...how about trying peace for a change?”

“Don’t look at me!” I insisted. “I’m opposed to intervention and want ALL the troops brought home, with the possible exception of the ones in South Korea. Our President, on the other hand, is looking for full-scale invasions of Afghanistan, and to listen to the rhetoric, Iraq. And I voted Libertarian!”

“Alex,” Sam interjected, “do ANY of these Navy men who eat here regularly agree with going to war?”

“No,” Alex admitted. “But they feed the system by joining the military.”

“And,” I countered, “are necessary to the defense of the country, our allies, and to keep the shipping lanes open. The problem is not the military, it’s the civilians in charge of the military. And we could prevent most of the BS interventionism by restructuring the military, such that the vast majority of ground troops were Reserve or National Guard units. That would provide an automatic pause while they were activated and called up, and make the political price for going to war much higher.”

“An interesting concept.”

“The Navy and Marines,” I continued, “would be the ‘first responders’ if they were needed. And that really wouldn’t hurt national defense, as any invasion, despite the fantasy in *Red Dawn*, would be nearly impossible. The Chinese have no navy to speak of, and they sure aren’t going to walk across the Pacific. The Russians would have to try to come through Siberia and Alaska, and I think we’d notice if they were foolish enough to try that. Our Navy and Air Force would close the Bering Strait instantly. We’d have plenty of time to activate our units.”

“Are you running for President?” Alex asked. “I might actually vote for you!”

“I doubt it,” I chuckled. “I don’t believe Washington, DC, should control healthcare, I believe the federal government is far too big, I think taxes ought to be lowered and I believe the true minimum wage is \$0.”

“Zero?” Sam asked.

“He means people would be fired if the minimum wage is raised,” Alex said. “It’s a fairly tired argument with no real basis in fact.”

“Businesses have to be profitable,” I said, “and other than their initial capitalization or borrowing, all of their available cash comes from their

customers. If costs increase, prices have to increase, quality has to decrease, or you have to find efficiencies. You can argue that the business models are all wrong, and I won't disagree with you, because that's not how I run NIKA, but in the end, a business only has limited funds to spend before they're forced to raise prices. YOU know that, because we've discussed your costs when we work out our agreements for the special meals."

"And the CEOs all take home millions at the expense of the little guy."

I nodded, "That is a major problem, and one I debated with a businessman friend. Eventually, the peasants rise up and take everything from you if the disparity in income and wealth is too great. That's why our lowest-paid people make enough money to live comfortably in Chicago, and our highest paid people make far less than people in comparable positions. I can't give you a fixed ratio, but someone making ten million while employing people who make \$7.00 an hour is seriously problematic in my book."

"So you're a socialist at heart!" Alex said with a grin. "Good to know!"

"It's pragmatic," I replied. "But it's also the right thing to do. You take less out of this place than most owners would, because you pay your staff better. It's the same basic principle, even if we have fundamental philosophical differences. And you know we agree on most civil rights issues, and, more importantly, we both detest George Bush!"

Alex laughed, "Common cause between a socialist and a libertarian! Who'd have thunk it! I do have to correct one thing you said - defense contractors get piles upon piles of taxpayer money that could find much better use."

"No argument from me. While I believe in a strong national defense, the military-industrial complex is little more than an enrichment scheme for their shareholders at the expense of the people."



“As I said, we’ll make a good socialist of you yet!”

“Alex, you’re a capitalist just as I am. This place proves it! Hell, if a *Canadian* can be successful here, anybody can!”

“You adhere to our national religion, so what does that say about YOU?” Alex grinned. “And your favorite player is a *French-Canadian*!”

“I think he’s got you there,” Kara replied.

“Hush, you!” I commanded.

“The room is ready for you,” Sam said.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Where’s Jessica?” Sam asked.

“Probably elbows deep in somebody’s guts,” I replied. “She’ll be here once her shift is over, which, if things go right, means she’ll be here right before we start dinner.”

We headed to the banquet room which was created by opening the movable walls between all three private dining areas. Alex had arranged his last seatings such that the restaurant would be empty by 8:00pm, and tables would be moved to create a dance floor in the main dining area. We were the first to arrive, but over the next thirty minutes, most of the guests arrived, including all of the ‘Saint Martin Six’, each with a spouse or significant other.

“Fond memories?” Samantha asked after I’d affectionately greeted Louise, who was the last to arrive, with a boyfriend in tow.

"There's no way I could forget," I replied. "Nor could I forget a certain hayloft in a barn in Plainfield."

Samantha smirked, "You're still the only one to get the 'Wonder Woman' experience!"

"Is Brian coming home soon?"

"No. There's an op on. You can guess where and what. Howard is at Diego Garcia now."

"We're just going to sink deeper and deeper into the briar patch. Hopefully, our friends will all come back alive. Just because they're in non-combat positions doesn't mean they're safe."

"Nor does being at your desk minding your own business on a quiet Tuesday morning."

"True," I agreed.

"Before you move on to talk to others, I wanted to let you know that Wendy Cobb accepted the role as Chief Security Officer at Spurgeon. She'll start on February 11th."

"I'm not surprised. I was reasonably sure she was a good fit, and as an honest cop, she needed to get out of the CPD."

"The only way that's ever going to be fixed is to start putting leadership in jail. Complete transparency and an independent civilian police review board with actual teeth. And no contract that in any way interferes with oversight."

“And you think I have ideas which are impossible to implement!”

“A girl can dream, can’t she?” Samantha asked impishly.

“So can a boy!” I agreed, knowing exactly what she meant.

The guests mingled and drank, and Liz and Julius arrived about twenty minutes before the meal was to begin, followed almost immediately by Jessica.

“You look ravishing,” I said to my wife when I greeted her.

“I spent all afternoon doing chart reviews, grading papers, and reading medical journals. The ER was a ghost town today for some reason.”

“Don’t complain, Jess!”

“Never!”

We sat down, enjoyed our meal, and later, just before she and Julius were to leave, I had a dance with Liz.

“I’m very happy for you,” I said as we danced chastely.

“Thanks. Will you survive without me for two weeks?”

“I have Jamie, Deborah, Ben, and Bob to keep me out of trouble!”

“They’ll have their hands full!”

“And you don’t?” I asked.

Liz laughed softly, “Oh, I do, but it’s my full-time job!”

"I'm lucky to have you."

"And I'm lucky to have you, too."



## January 21, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

"What are you going to do?" Libby asked when she arrived at my house after breakfast on Monday morning.

"About?" I asked.

"Angelina! Duh!"

"Well, if I don't do it with her, I'm letting my dad control my actions. If I do it with her, I'm having sex with a girl who had sex with my dad!"

"You already did that!"

"Yeah, I know, but I didn't know, if you know what I mean."

"Get your dad out of your head!"

"Easier said than done," I replied.

"Obviously," Libby confirmed. "How many virgins will it take to solve the problem?"

I laughed, "And you'll provide however many it takes?"

"Let's just say I know some girls who want to have the starting goalie of the hockey team 'twitch their twine' for the first time!"

"You do realize that a goalie tries to STOP that from happening, right?"

"Is your dad as difficult as you are?"

"Worse!" I replied with a grin. "He's had twenty-three more years to practice! So, out of curiosity, who?"

Libby giggled, "Out of curiosity, huh?"

"I am actually curious."

"CeCe, who plays first base for the girls' softball team, Kenzie, who plays second-chair sax in the concert band, and Riya, Mr. Cassidy's daughter."

"Oh, sure, that would be a *grand* idea! Fail math AND get booted from the hockey team!"

"I didn't say you should tell him!"

"And how is it that you know about these girls?"

"CeCe asked me if you had a girlfriend, and I told her you weren't interested in going steady. She said that was fine because she just wanted the 'Jesse Block experience'."

"The what?!" I asked.

"I might have mentioned how great you were in bed," Libby replied.

"Wonderful!" I replied sarcastically. "And how did THAT come up in conversation?"

"Some girls were talking about what they thought it might be like and I volunteered information. They put two-and-two together."

"Some girls?" I asked.

"CeCe and Kenzie, plus a couple of other girls. The others are probably interested, but they haven't said anything specific."

"And Riya?" I asked.

"She's Kenzie's best friend."

"You do realize this is pretty much exactly what happened with my dad in Junior High and High School, right?"

"And that's a bad thing? Seriously?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"First of all, you're my best friend, and shouldn't a best friend tell their best friend when a girl wants to fuck? Second, I can guarantee they haven't been with your dad. Third, you're a red-blooded hockey player and you should get ALL the benefits of being a star athlete!"

"And you want to watch, right?" I asked.

“That would be cool, but I don’t think the girls would go for it!”

“And you think having sex with those girls would be a good idea?”

“It wouldn’t be a BAD idea,” Libby tittered. “And, just think, they have friends. And those friends have friends!”

“You’re a nut!” I said, shaking my head.

“Takes one to know one!” Libby replied with a silly smile. “So, what are you going to do about Angelina?”

“See her after class. I’ll decide before then.”

“And the other girls?” Libby asked with a smirk.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, mostly to get Libby to drop the topic.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” she asked.

“Adi will be here for lunch, but otherwise no plans. Is Karli going to be here?”

“Yes. You didn’t practice this morning, did you?”

“No. When there’s a public holiday on Monday, we skip practice.”

We had a fun day just hanging around the house with nothing special to do.

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 Steve

The call I expected came just after lunch, and I had Kimmy put it through.

“Mark February 8th on your calendar!” Officer Wendy Cobb declared. “That’s my last day on the force, and we have a date!”

“Congratulations, and I’m glad you saw the light!”

“Thanks! And you better make me see God, or I’ll shoot you as I promised!”

“You do realize it takes two to tango, right?” I asked, my voice modulated to convey amusement.

“Nobody has ever complained!”

I chuckled, “Any guy who complains about sex isn’t going to get very much of it!”

Wendy laughed, “Good point!”

“Where did you want to meet?” I asked.

“Why not come to my place? I’ll make you dinner and the bedroom is just up the stairs, so there’s no wasted time!”

“Why wait?” I chuckled. “Kitchen counter? Dining room table Foyer?”

“I have handcuffs!”

“Not after you’re off the force,” I replied.

“I have my own set!”

“Of course you do! Don’t forget about the requirement for an STI test.”



"I should be offended, but given stories I've heard, I understand. Bring a case of rubbers!"

"I had a vasectomy, remember? So I will, but they aren't necessary from my perspective."

"I do remember now that you mention it. No rubber...the last time THAT happened was Prom! And it led to a brief scare!"

"A not uncommon occurrence," I replied. "I've marked the 8th on my calendar. What's your address?"

She provided an address which, from what I knew about the city, would be a walk-up brownstone, and in a fairly nice part of the city.

"Pretty good on a cops' pay," I observed.

"Got it in the divorce. My ex-husband works in the city's finance department. He's a senior guy in tax enforcement."

"How long were you married?"

"Four years. We met not long after I graduated from the Police Academy, got drunk together, got married a couple of months later, then spent three years working towards a divorce, which is why I never considered having a kid with him. The divorce was final about two years ago."

"OK. Remember, my price of freedom is reporting."

"Including explicit details?"

“Kara has wifely privileges in that regard, yes.”

“Ever given a bad report?”

“Not because of ME!” I declared piously.

“Mr. Adams, I keep my promises. If you aren’t the best fuck I’ve had in my life, I’m going to shoot you in your most valuable asset!”

“A headshot is a sure kill,” I replied.

“Not THAT head!” she said, laughing.

“See you on the 8th!”

We said ‘goodbye’ and I hung up. I saw in *adium* that Kara was on-line, which would let me tell her.

NIKASteve: Wendy Cobb called, as predicted!

PolymerPrincess: And????

NIKASteve: I’m having dinner at her place on the 8th.

PolymerPrincess: And????

NIKASteve: I think you can work out the rest for yourself!

PolymerPrincess: I think I’m going to want details on this one!

NIKASteve: She did threaten to shoot me if I wasn’t the best she’d ever had.

PolymerPrincess: Like there’s any risk to that?

NIKASteve: You never know! :-)

PolymerPrincess: Well, I sure don’t believe there’s anyone better, though that’s anecdotal, not from experience! See you at home!

NIKASteve: Love you!

PolymerPrincess: Love you, too!

I minimized *adium*, brought my development environment back to the front of the screen, and got back to work.



## January 22, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Birgit

“Birgit Adams, your entire family is going to burn in hell!” Leah announced from the end of the lunch table where my friends and I were sitting.

“I’d have to actually believe hell existed to be concerned about that,” I replied, calmly taking another bite of my BLT sandwich.

“You’ll find out just how real it is!” Leah declared.

“It’s as real as the «djinn» you ask to grant your wishes every day,” I responded. “How is that working out for you?”

My friends all laughed.

“And,” I continued, “if your imaginary being actually existed, and he, she, it, or they are that concerned about my family, they have a lot to answer for - war, famine, pestilence, death, and crazy girls spouting nonsense!”

“There’s nothing imaginary about Jesus Christ! He was a real person!”

“So was Socrates, and he basically met the same end!”

“Not even close!” Leah protested. “Did Socrates rise from the dead?”

“No, but his followers didn’t need to make up stories about him to get HIS teachings to spread! Go tell your fables to somebody else! Or, better yet, keep them to yourself!”

“All of you will burn in hell!” Leah said, turning and walking away.

“What a bitch!” Tiffany declared.

“My mom was exactly like that in High School,” I said. “It can be cured.”

“By?” Naomi asked.

“Fucking!” I giggled. “That’s how Dad got Mom to give up that silly fairy tale!”

“Birgit Adams!” Mrs. Nance exclaimed. “We do NOT use that language in school. I’ll see you in the detention room after school!”

I knew if I reacted, things would only get worse.

“Yes, Mrs. Nance,” I replied. “I’ll need to call my parents.”

“I’ll take care of that, young lady!”

She walked away.

“Gawd, what a witch!” Hannah declared.

“You’re allowed to say that word, Birgit,” Tiffany objected. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“Because that would just make things worse. Let me quick call my dad before she gets to the office.”

I pulled my mobile phone from my purse and dialed Dad’s number. He answered right away, just as he always did when I called.

“Hi, Pumpkin,” Dad said. “What’s wrong?”

“How did you know something was wrong?” I asked.

“You called me at 11:30am!”

“Uhm, yeah. Anyway, I said the ‘F’ word and have to be in detention.”

“You said ‘fair’?” Dad asked, obviously teasing.

“No,” I huffed, “and you know what I meant! But I can’t say it without risking getting in even more trouble.”

“Stay in detention, and let your sisters know so they aren’t worried.”

“Mrs. Nance said she was going to call you.”

“OK,” Dad replied. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks, Dad! Love you!”

“Love you, too, Pumpkin!”

We said ‘goodbye’ and I pressed ‘End’ on my phone and put it back in my purse.

 Steve

“What’s got you laughing so hard?” Kimmy asked as I put my phone back down on my desk.

“Birgit apparently said the word ‘fuck’ and received detention. One of the teachers is supposed to call me to discuss it.”

“That should be a fun conversation!”

“As in humorous? Absolutely.”

My desk phone buzzed and I pressed the speaker button.

“Hi Lucas,” I said. “Someone from the school?”

“You’re psychic!”

“Nah,” I admitted. “Birgit called me on my mobile quicker than the teacher could get to the office. Go ahead and put the call through.”

“Will do.”

He disconnected, then transferred the call, which I put on speakerphone. Kimmy came into my office and closed the glass doors so we’d have a bit of privacy.

“This is Steve Adams,” I said. “I have you on speaker, but the doors to my office are closed.”

“Mr. Adams, this is June Nance from LaSalle. I’m calling about your daughter, Birgit.”

“What’s the problem, Mrs. Nance?”

“Your daughter used profanity in the lunchroom.”

“And what word was that, Mrs. Nance?” I inquired.

“The ‘F’ word.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“What do you mean? Everyone knows which word the refers to!”

“In our home, that refers to the word ‘fair’, and is the only word my children are NOT permitted to use in the way it’s normally used. The word I suspect you are referring to is perfectly acceptable in my home. But you need to tell me the word.”

Kimmy looked like she was going to wet herself, trying to hold back her laughter.

“Oh, come on!” Mrs. Nance protested. “You can’t be serious!”

“I’m perfectly serious,” I said. “First, if you can’t say it, you can’t keep her in detention her because I have no idea why you’re detaining her. Second, ‘fair’ is FAR worse than any word you might report her as having said. It’s only used in the context I mean by people whining that something didn’t go their way. The other word is a useful epithet or describes a normal, and necessary, human activity. So, what word did Birgit say.”

“You know very well which word I mean, and I won’t let you goad me into saying it.”

It was time to stop being silly, and press my point.

“Then if you keep my daughter in detention for one second, you’ll receive a call from my attorney demanding a formal, written statement as to why you’re detaining her, requesting a hearing to determine what my daughter actually said, and, if necessary, I’ll file a civil suit against you personally. You can TRY to claim *in loco parentis*, but unless you tell me, specifically, what she said, you’ll lose. And you know it.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“I’m going to have the principal call you,” she said.

“You do that,” I replied. “But make sure he knows *exactly* what Birgit said, as well as the context.”

“Context?”

“Every utterance has context, Mrs. Nance, and unless you know the context, you can’t know which meaning of that word my daughter meant.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake! She said ‘fucking’!”

“Now, that wasn’t too difficult, was it. What was the context?”

“I’m, uhm, not sure. She said something about you getting her mom to give up some kind of fairy tale.”

I had a pretty good idea of the general topic, but wondered what had brought on the comment by Birgit. I’d find out when I spoke to her at home later in the evening.

“What’s the specific rule she violated?” I asked.



“Using profanity.”

“I assume there’s a list of some number of words which are not permitted?”

“No. The rule simply says ‘no profanity’.”

“So, it’s purely subjective,” I replied. “How do you expect the kids to know which words are appropriate and which aren’t? And if they can’t know, then the punishment is arbitrary and capricious.”

“You may take that up with the principal.”

“I believe I will. And the Board of Education, if necessary. You’re imposing purely arbitrary punishment based on what amounts to a secret list of ‘bad’ words. I’m happy to hear you defend that.”

There was another silence.

“I believe we’ll just let this be a warning,” Mrs. Nance said. “Birgit won’t have to serve detention.”

“Thank you. I’m sure you’ll hear from the principal or someone at the Board of Education.”

“Wait! I did what you wanted!”

“Did you?” I asked.

“I took away the detention! That’s what you wanted!”

“Again, is it?”

“What is it that you want?” she asked, sounding exasperated.

“World peace, a ride in the Space Shuttle, and a way to reverse the effects of two concussions.”

“I meant from me!” she said, sounding even more exasperated.

“You? Personally? Nothing. Well, except for you to stop trying to enforce arbitrary rules on kids who have no idea if they’re violating.”

“That’s school policy!”

“Then change it,” I said. “Anyway, thank you for your call, and Birgit and I will discuss this incident when she arrives home.”

“But...” she spluttered.

“I’m very busy, Mrs. Nance, and don’t have time for a philosophy lesson. Goodbye.”

“Uhm, goodbye.”

I pressed the button to disconnect the call, and Kimmy finally burst out laughing.

“Just, wow!” she said, shaking her head. “You had her twisted into so many knots she may never get out! And making her say ‘fuck’ was just perfect! Now what?”

“I’ll speak to Birgit when I get home. She has an amazing ability to open her mouth without thinking about the consequences!”

“So, a normal teenage girl, then?”

“There is NOTHING normal about Birgit!” I declared.

---

 Jesse

“Hi, Jesse!” Angelina exclaimed when I walked up to her after school.

“Hi!” I said.

“I think we should go to your house because my sister is going to be home. Nobody’s home at your house, right?”

“My moms don’t get home until between 5:30pm and 6:00pm, but they won’t say anything.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. They could walk in on us in bed and I wouldn’t get in any trouble and they wouldn’t call your parents or anything like that.”

“Wow! So you’re not upset with me or anything?”

“You didn’t actually do anything wrong,” I replied. “It’s just weird.”

“I’m sorry Kelly told you that secret. Nobody was supposed to know. And, Jesse, I’d much rather be with you!”

“And you’re really OK with it just being about sex?”

Angelina smiled, "I'm not allowed to date, so it can't really be about anything else right now. We can talk about it after my «quince», but I promise I'm not expecting anything more than just enjoying sex! You do like it with me, right?"

"Very much!"

"Then why are we just standing here?"

I took her hand and we began walking towards my house.

---

 Birgit

"What happened?" Tiffany asked when I left with her, Hannah, Amber, and Julie to walk home. Stephie and Ashley walked with their friends, and usually stayed far enough away so our groups didn't interact, but we could see each other. Albert, Dave's boys, and my actual cousin David walked with a bunch of guys.

"Mrs. Nance called my dad and I'd guess he 'mind-fucked' her, because she changed it to a warning, instead of detention."

"What do you mean by 'mind-fucked'?" Julie asked.

"Used rhetoric to confuse her and put her in a position where she couldn't defend sending me to detention."

"What about Leah?" Hannah asked.

"What about Leah?" I replied. "Somebody brainwashed her into believing she has an invisible magic friend who grants wishes, except I bet she's never had a wish granted!"

“What was that about your mom?” Julie asked.

“In High School, she was a Bible Thumper, and basically told my dad the same stuff Leah said. But Mom was cured when she and Dad fucked!”

“Cured?”

“Of being what she called a ‘Holy Roller’.”

I knew it was a bit more complicated, because they’d had their ‘Year in the Wilderness’ when they were apart, but in the end, Mom had become like dad - an agnostic. I understood about her and Dad thinking that way, but to me, being a skeptic didn’t mean checking your brain at the door, and I put Allah and Jesus in the same category as Zeus, Hera, Isis, and Loki.

“You mean like Leah?”

“And her friends. Yes.”

“Introduce her to Jesse,” Tiffany giggled.

“Did you forget about the part where Jesse believes in God and goes to church every week?”

“That’s a bit strange,” Julie observed. “Given that nobody else in your family believes.”

“Not really,” I replied. “And Jesse would never get in anybody’s face the way Leah did, nor tell anyone they were going to hell. He’s like Patricia, Henry, and Gabby, my dad’s friends. They’re all Catholic but don’t get in anyone’s face about it. They’ll talk to you about it if you want, but otherwise, they keep it to themselves. Mr. Felipe at the dojo is like that, too.”

“Yeah,” Tiffany giggled, “but I bet your dad could make me see God!”

All of my friends laughed, and I did, too, though I was SURE Dad could make ME see God. I just needed to figure out how to make it happen!

---

 Jesse

“You’re amazing,” Angelina whispered, breathing heavily.

I was still hard and inside her, but she’d cum three times before I had shot into her, and I was enjoying the feel of her body under me, and the feel of her arms and legs wrapped around me.

“So are you,” I replied.

“How did you get to be so good?”

“Lots of practice!” I said with a grin, then kissed her softly.

“You’ve done it with lots of girls?”

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“No, I guess not. I guess after the thing with Kelly, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s always better not to talk about any specific people you’ve been with, or how many people you’ve been with. What happened with Kelly was a lesson about that.”

“Uhm, I can explain, but...”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“We were together so it’s not like she couldn’t know. It was like a totally random chance I happened to be at her house when your dad showed up.”

“Random chance for you; Loki working in my dad’s favor, like always!”

“You don’t seem upset.”

I kissed her again, then said. “You told me you’d rather be with me!”

Angelina giggled softly, “You’re my age, not three times my age! And you’re bigger AND better! At least for me!”

I laughed, “I’ll take the compliment, but you shouldn’t compare. You could really hurt someone’s feelings that way.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“It’s like with Kelly,” I said. “The less you talk about it with other people, the better. If you have a close friend who you can confide in and who will never spill the beans, that one person is probably OK. But otherwise, it’s better not to say anything. Think what would happen if your dad found out.”

“I don’t want to think about that!” Angelina declared. “He’d be SO upset I’m not sure what he would do.”

“You’ll have your «quince» soon. Isn’t that basically a declaration that you’re a woman?”

“Yes, but we’re Catholic and we’re not supposed to have sex until we’re married. I think my dad thinks I can have kids without having sex!”

I laughed, “No, he doesn’t, and THAT is what bugs him!”

“Your sisters are too young, but what will your dad say if they did what we’re doing right now?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “No double standards.”

“And he’d let them do what we’re doing now? In his house?”

“Yes, because he believes it’s up to us to decide if we want to do it.”

“I’ve decided that I want to do it again!” Angelina said impishly.

“Me, too!”

---

 Steve

“What happened today, Pumpkin?” I asked Birgit as we walked to karate with Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, Ashley, and Stephanie.

“Leah came over to our lunch table and told me that our entire family is going to hell.”

“Is that like Fantasyland?” Ashley asked, causing everyone to laugh.

“And what did you say?” Kara asked.



“That I didn’t believe hell existed, and I didn’t believe in her invisible magic friend.”

“What did Mrs. Nance overhear?” I asked.

“That the cure for Mom being a ‘Holy Roller’ was fucking!”

All of the adults laughed.

“It was a bit more complicated than that,” Kara said. “But essentially that’s true. You do need to be a bit more careful about your language.”

I could see steam about to burst from Birgit’s ears. While Kara was correct, there really wasn’t a need for her to say that, as I was working up to it. Coming from Kara, it would be received as an attack; coming from me, as a lesson. That was Birgit’s problem, but in the end, that made it MY problem, because it reinforced Birgit’s negative opinion of her mom.

“Your mom is right,” I said quickly, hoping to defuse any potential ‘hot war’ breaking out. “We’ll discuss it tomorrow morning.”

Later that evening, after karate, and after we put the kids to bed, Kara, Jessica, Suzanne, and I went to the sauna.

“Birgit is in a mood,” Kara observed.

“She is,” I agreed. “And I know you were perfectly in the right, but YOU saying to Birgit that she needs to be careful about what she says was taken as an attack, and it’s likely to lead her to say something that will actually get her in trouble.”

“Oh, give me a break!” Kara grouched. “That was as mild a rebuke as possible!”

"I agree," I replied. "I didn't say you were wrong. Birgit, on the other hand, just moved the weights on the scales against you."

"So I'm supposed to just let her walk all over me and never say anything?"

"Not at all," I countered. "I'm asking you to let me handle these minor kerfuffles because Birgit sees you as the enemy."

"I didn't DO anything to her," Kara protested.

"You're her mom," I replied. "That's enough. Penny is having similar problems with Amber. And Tiffany's mom with her, the way I hear it. But it's nothing like with Rachel or Francesca and their moms. And, I'm sure she'll grow out of it."

"When?" Kara asked in exasperation.

"Probably about the time she takes her first lover," I replied.

Which, if Birgit had her way, would be me, but there was no chance that could happen, no matter what the circumstances.

"She is nowhere near mature enough for that," Kara declared.

"I think I'd keep that particular opinion to myself," Jessica advised. "Or Birgit will do exactly what you think she shouldn't do."

"What IS it with her!" Kara asked in exasperation.

"She's you, but without an overbearing Dad who put her in a glass cage. She's free-spirited, sexually liberated, and, although it hasn't manifested itself just yet, likely has a very high sex drive. Just like you. The difference is, she wasn't treated like property from the time she was born the way you were."

"So why take it out on me?" Kara asked.

"Because she wants to displace you," Suzanne said. "In Birgit's very active fantasy mind, SHE is the perfect wife for Steve, not you."

"And when she makes her move, it's Steve who is going to be the bad guy," Jessica declared, "because he's going to firmly tell her 'no'."

"I am," I replied.

"And she'll STILL blame me!" Kara groused.

I shook my head, "No, that will be the beginning of the end of the cold war, because she'll accept that her fantasy simply isn't possible."

"Uh-huh."

"She will," I replied. "Because it'll be *me* who makes that clear. And while Birgit will almost certainly have a string of lovers, she's not the one who will be the holy terror we expected her to be. Ashley is going to be the one to watch out for."

"We all thought she was so quiet and sensitive."

"She was," I chuckled. "But living in THIS house desensitized her. She's very much like Jessica in that regard, though without the, and pardon me for saying this, Babe, the rough edges."

"You don't need to apologize, Tiger. Being an actual bitch was pretty much a prerequisite when I was in medical school. It's different now, and someone like María Cristina can be as sweet as she wants. You know how few women were

surgeons in the early 80s. But, almost twenty years later, you've managed to sand off the rough edges."

"I've certainly enjoyed rubbing against you," I grinned. "Both inside and out!"

"You know what I think I need right now?" Jessica asked.

"What's that?"

"For you to throw me down on the sauna floor and fuck my brains out!"

"Happy to oblige, Ma'am!"



## IV. Don't Mess With the Adams Girls!

**January 23, 2002, Chicago, Illinois**

 Birgit

"Don't think I missed the barely contained explosion last night on the way to karate," Dad said as we cuddled on Wednesday morning.

I wanted to scream, because Mom was such a pain in the butt, but if I did, Dad would be very upset with me.

"You were handling it!" I declared. "Mrs. Nance called you and you were talking to me about it!"

"I was, but what your mom said wasn't wrong."

"But why did she have to butt in?" I protested.

"She's your mom," I replied. "And she does get her say in matters."

"But we do just fine!"

"In *your* opinion. But yours is not the only opinion that counts. A *mature* young woman would understand that, and take it into account before she let steam come from her ears."

I felt like I was about two inches tall, because dad had just said I was still a little girl in his eyes, and THAT hurt so bad I wanted to cry. I was in a terrible situation, because dad was unhappy with me, and that would ruin any chance I

had of achieving my most important goal. That meant I had to show him how mature I was, no matter how much Mom annoyed me.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said, really meaning it. "I'll try harder."

"You can do it, Pumpkin. Growing up is difficult and everyone has struggles."

"I know," I sighed.

"I love you, Pumpkin, and so do your moms. We just have different methods of dealing with the challenges of raising our children. And before you say it, neither one is better than the other, they're just different. I know you prefer my style, but my style is very uncommon, and you'll have to deal with bosses and other people in authority who will make your mom look like a pussy cat."

"Like Mrs. Nance?"

"She's just following orders," Dad said. "But like many who enforce the rules, she does it without thinking things through."

"What did you say to her?" I asked.

"I insisted she tell me what you said, and then asked her if there was a list of prohibited words. There isn't, which means, ultimately, it's arbitrary. BUT, young lady, you know what words are appropriate to use at school, and what words are not."

"I do," I sighed. "I didn't watch my tongue."

"A thing which seems to happen repeatedly with you, Pumpkin."

“I know,” I replied. “I’m sorry, Dad. I try, but sometimes I just can’t help myself.”

“And when you can help yourself, THEN you’ll be the mature young lady I know you can be.”

“Breakfast,” Mom called from the doorway.

“We’ll be there in two minutes,” Dad said.

“I’ll expect you in three!” Mom replied with a knowing smile.

I snuggled close to Dad and he tightened his arms around me. He loved me very much, and I hated the idea of disappointing him. I’d have to try very hard not to.



## January 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois

 Jesse

A tall, thin blonde girl came up to me while I was at my locker on Friday morning.

“Hi, Jesse. I’m CeCe Carpenter. I saw you win the citywide tournament last year and think you’re an awesome goalie!”

“Hi,” I replied. “Sorry, but I’ve never been to one of your softball games.”

“You haven’t missed anything, because we suck!”



I was SO tempted to say something about her being good at sucking, but even with what Libby had said, that was probably too much for the first thirty seconds of a first conversation. Of course, the NEXT thing that popped into my head was the idea of getting blowjobs from the entire team! Mom Two was absolutely right about me suffering from 'testosterone poisoning'!

"What's up?" I asked instead.

"Libby said you don't have a girlfriend, but I want to make sure, 'cause I don't want to bet 'that girl'."

"Marlo Thomas had brown hair with a tint of red."

"Who?" CeCe asked, looking confused.

"There was a TV sitcom called *That Girl* starring Marlo Thomas. She's been on *Friends* a couple of times, as a character named Sandra Green. Mom One pointed her out to me, and told me about the sitcom. I don't think it's been shown in reruns since it went off the air in 1971."

"Mom One?"

"You don't know about my family?" I asked.

"What about them?"

"My birth mom is lesbian and is married, though not legally, to another girl. I call them Mom One and Mom Two."

"Uhm, OK," CeCe said, looking confused.

“Don’t worry,” I said with a smile. “Most people are confused by my family. My dad has two wives and a bunch of girlfriends.”

“My Dad would KILL for that,” CeCe declared. “But I’m pretty sure my mom would kill HIM if he suggested anything even remotely like that!”

“That’s true for most people, I think. My parents are VERY different. And, to answer your question, no, I’m not going with anyone right now. I don’t need that complication!”

“Would you like to do something sometime?”

Again, I was VERY tempted to say something completely inappropriate for a first conversation, but I had no idea if CeCe knew Libby had said anything to me, and the last thing I wanted to do was mess up Libby’s relationship with her friends. And I needed to make a decision about CeCe. While it was entirely possible we could get together and nothing would happen, I didn’t believe for one second that would happen, and as Dad liked to say, this was the inflection point.

I almost laughed because Dad was in my head again, but this time, in a good way. It really did come down to a difference of opinion on relationships, and not much else. I’d been with eight girls, and I wasn’t even sixteen, so, if Mom One’s estimate was right, I’d need around fifteen girls by my birthday to match my dad! I almost laughed again, because, with Libby’s help, I might actually be able to achieve that, even though my birthday was less than a month away.

I took quick stock of CeCe - pretty, blonde, blue eyes, thin, small breasts, long legs, flat stomach, and ruby lips that would look amazing if she WAS good at sucking, or, actually, even if she wasn’t and had to learn. I almost laughed for a third time because it was obvious I had a severe case of ‘testosterone poisoning’ and CeCe was sexy and athletic.

It dawned on me that part of the problem was that Libby and I had been having sex nearly every day before she started seeing Karli, and now the only regular sex I was having was with Angelina on Monday afternoons. That might change a bit once Adi had been on the Pill for a month, but as with Macrina, I didn't know if I could count on regular sex, and I was positive that chastity was NOT my calling.

"Sure," I said. "What and when?"

"What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I have a hockey game in the morning, then I'm hanging out with a friend. On Sunday, some friends and I have our Hangout."

CeCe pouted.

"What's a 'Hangout'?"

"We get together and talk about stuff. Your parents might have called it a 'bull session' or 'rap session'."

"Oh, OK. Uhm, then when? I know you have hockey practice pretty much every day."

"How about a week from Saturday? I don't have any plans for the afternoon."

I was attending Guys' Night, but I could spend the afternoon with CeCe, which would be a great way to spend the afternoon.

"Sure! What and where?"

"Do you play pool?" I asked.

“No, but I’d love to learn if you could teach me.”

“I can,” I replied, holding in a joke about holding a stick and using hard, smooth strokes to sink balls into a pocket.

“What time?”

“How about 11:00am? We could have lunch, and then play pool.”

“Sure! What’s your address?”

I gave it to her, but then had to hurry to class so as to be in my seat by the time the tardy bell rang.

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 Steve

“Chagas disease?” I repeated. “What’s that?”

“It’s an inflammatory, infectious disease caused by the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi*,” Mary Whittaker said. “The parasite is found in the feces of the triatomine bug, known popularly as ‘kissing bug’. We’re pretty sure she caught it on a trip to South America last October.”

“Can you treat it?” I asked.

“Yes. There are two drugs, benznidazole and nifurtimox, both of which we ordered from the CDC. We’ll try the first one, then the second depending on the efficacy of the first.”

“The CDC?”

“You have to get it from them. I suspect that’s how they ensure they know every case. Mostly we never see this in the US, so it makes sense. I doubt they’ve ever seen a case in Stockholm or Saint Petersburg.”

“What’s her prognosis?”

“We won’t know until she’s received her first course of drugs. If we’ve caught it in time, which is possible, the drug therapy might be able to kill all of the parasites. If not, then we treat the symptoms, with the most common complications being heart problems and digestive trouble.”

“How do you catch it?” I asked.

“Bites or feces of the bug. The Voronins were on a trip on the Amazon, which is where we suspect Anya was infected. If they had stuck to the cities, that would have reduced their risk considerably, as the bugs tend to live in mud and thatch.”

“And it took so long because it’s basically one of the last things you would look for, right?”

“Exactly. An experimental diagnostic computer at Stanford came up with the possibility, but rated it as less than 1%, despite the visit to South America. The only facility which can perform the test is a CDC lab, again, because we couldn’t keep the necessary materials in stock because they’d expire before we ever used them.”

“I’d be curious to know more about that computer,” I said.

Mary laughed, “I bet you would! In fact, I asked, and even with an NDA, they won’t show it to anyone outside of Stanford at this point.”

"I'll mention it to Jess and ask her to keep an eye out for an article in a medical journal."

"It wouldn't surprise me to see something in a year or so, but there's still a lot of work to be done, because judgment calls outweigh statistics in doing differential diagnosis."

"Art not science," I replied.

"Something like that! Anyway, I'll see you in a month."

"Sounds good. How long will you keep Anya?"

"A minimum of a week. If the drug works, then she'll go home and can be treated by the hospital in Saint Petersburg. I've already been in touch with them and Karolinska to let them know."

"I appreciate your dedication and effort, Mary. Are you going to write an article?"

"Probably just a short diagnostic note that would be published in the Mayo newsletter. I'd wager I'll never see another case of Chagas for the rest of my career. Nobody here at Mayo has actually seen one, with the exception of a doctor who from Colombia who is here for a fellowship, but he's a surgeon and wasn't consulted."

"OK. See you in about four weeks!"

We said 'goodbye' and hung up.

 Jesse

“Hi, Jesse!” a cute girl with long black hair said when I was putting my books in my locker before going to the cafeteria. “I’m Kenzie Baker!”

I wanted to laugh so hard, because I knew exactly what she wanted, well, assuming Libby was correct, which I was sure she was. Another inflection point, and another opportunity for my ‘testosterone poisoning’ to lead me exactly where any red-blooded teenage hockey player wanted to go! The only question in my mind was how far to take these opportunities. I would need to have a word with Libby because I didn’t want to go TOO crazy, as there could be all kinds of problems if parents or teachers discovered what was going on.

“You’re in the band, right?” I asked.

“Second-chair sax! I’m good enough I’ll have first chair next year after Ariel graduates.”

I just HAD to make a joke about that, but I could keep it relatively clean, albeit with a tinge of innuendo, and plausible deniability.

“So,” I chuckled, “you’re good at blowing your own horn as well as your sax?”

She rolled her eyes, “Dad says the same thing when I say I’m good enough for first chair and only didn’t get it because I’m a Freshman. You were lucky to get the starting role last year, and the school was lucky your coach is more open-minded than Mr. Sanders.”

“He’s the music teacher, right?” I asked.

“Yes. And he’s the one responsible for both concert band and marching band.”

“How long have you played the saxophone?”

“For six years. I started with a recorder when I was in kindergarten, then learned to play sax in second grade. Do you play an instrument?”

“No, but Mom One says I’m pretty good at blowing my own horn!”

Kenzie laughed, “Sounds like my Dad. But ‘Mom One’?”

“I have two moms. My birth mom is lesbian.”

“Interesting. So that’s your mom and her girlfriend at the games? I thought they were just friends. I’ve seen your dad there, but with other girls, and just assumed your parents were divorced.”

I figured I should just get it all out front, and then Kenzie and CeCe, who Libby said were best friends, could just compare notes.

“My birth mom and dad were never married,” I said. “They chose to have me, and my other mom, who I call ‘Mom Two’ is my birth mom’s wife. Not legally, but they don’t really care what the government says. And my dad has two wives and a bunch of girlfriends. And I don’t mean an ex-wife, I mean two actual wives, though not legally.”

“Uhm, that’s kind of strange, but OK.”

“What’s up?” I asked, just as I had with CeCe.

“I’ve seen you hang out with Libby and another girl, but they aren’t your girlfriends, right?”

“They’re friends, and we hang out a lot, but I’m not steady with anyone.”



“Cool. Want to get together sometime?”

“Sure, though I have hockey practice every day, and my schedule is pretty full.”

“What about after dinner?”

“That could work. Did you have a day in mind?”

“My parents go out on Thursday evenings, so you could come to my house and I could play my sax for you.”

Again, I so wanted to say something like ‘and blow my horn’, but it was too soon.

“And how much trouble would you be in if they ever found out I was there?”

“Grounded until next century,” Kenzie replied.

“You could come to my house,” I offered. “My moms will be home, so you could tell your parents that.”

“That’s, uhm, OK, I guess,” she said, sounding disappointed.

Even if Libby hadn’t said anything, the invitation, and response to my question about her parents telegraphed *exactly* what she wanted. That meant I could be a bit less careful about how I responded.

“I have a basement rec room where nobody would bother us, and trust me, my moms are WAY cooler than you can ever imagine.”

“No parents are THAT cool!” Kenzie declared.

I chuckled, "Trust me, mine are!"

It dawned on me, just then, that I'd let my testosterone make me forget something VERY important - STI tests. There was enough time for Kenzie and CeCe to get them, but it was a question of how to broach the subject.

"There's one complication," I continued. "And I'm not quite sure how to broach it."

Kenzie smiled, looked around, and quietly said, "I think we both know what's going to happen."

I smiled, "Then there is one very important thing you need to know, and that's that if you're thinking about blowing anything other than your horn, you have to get an STI test."

"But it would be my first!" she protested in a whisper.

"Which doesn't change the requirement," I replied. "There are other ways to get STIs, despite what they implied in health class. Remember what I said about my moms being cooler than you can imagine? They won't have a problem with that, so long as you've had a proper test. It's mandatory. They won't check, but I will."

"Where?" she asked, again keeping her voice low.

"The best place is the clinic at UofC hospital. They can do the test at little or no cost, and it takes three days. If you go to the Eastman Center, they'll help you. They have an office right off the ER."

"I better tell CeCe," Kenzie said, neatly solving THAT problem. "We can go together."

"Why don't you have dinner at my house on Thursday? I'm sure it'll be OK with my moms."

"Cool! What time?"

"Be there by 5:45pm, please."

I gave her my address, then hurried to the cafeteria. I got my lunch, sat with my friends, and chatted while we ate. When we finished, Libby and I walked away together.

"Next time you send girls for the 'Jesse Block experience', let them know they need STI tests."

"I didn't send anyone!" Libby protested. "What happened?"

"You didn't know CeCe and Kenzie were going to come to talk to me?"

"No! The last time I spoke to them was last Friday, before I spoke to you! So, what are you going to do?"

I grinned, "I sent them for STI tests!"

"You dog!" Libby teased. "Are you going to tell them to keep quiet, or are you going to let them spread the word?"

"Well," I grinned, "I'd need fifteen or so more by February 22nd to match my dad's total from before he turned sixteen."

“No way!” Libby exclaimed. “Seriously? Like twenty-five total?”

“That’s what Mom One said, because she and Aunt Melanie were bringing girls to my dad and telling girls where to get what Mom One calls ‘an expert deflowering’!”

“Talk about getting your dad out of your head! Are you serious?”

“If I was, I don’t think I’d have the time!”

“Hmm. Call it twenty-five days and fifteen girls, so 2 every three days, allowing for days you can’t because of hockey, or whatever, and not allowing for threesomes, which would help.”

“You’re a nut!”

“As I said, takes one to know one!”

“Just let it be, please. Call CeCe an Kenzie and experiment, assuming it goes the way you think it will, and I’ll see how I feel afterwards.”

“Extremely satisfied!”

“Obviously! But you know what I meant. Please don’t say anything to anyone else.”

“What about Riya?”

“If she decides to talk to me, I’ll decide what to do, but don’t say anything, please.”

“Are you upset with me?”

“No, I just don’t want to get totally out of control.”

“Do you know how many girls your dad was with before he graduated from High School?”

“Around forty,” I replied. “And no, I have *no* interest in competing with that number! That is not my dad being in my head, that is me saying it’s over-the-top. Not to mention at some point I’ll probably have a girlfriend who won’t be like Aunt Melanie or Mom One!”

“Adi or Macrina?”

“Maybe, but who knows? I’m in no hurry to have a steady girlfriend.”

“I wish I could get Francesca back for you somehow.”

“I just need to figure out how to get her out of my mind.”

“Drowning yourself in the rain of pussy!”

“I’m not sure that’s the solution,” I replied.

“Are you complaining?”

“Hell, NO!” I chuckled.

---

 Steve

“What did you decide about the movie?” I asked Kara and Jessica at dinner.

"We agreed on *The Count of Monte Cristo*. We both decided a movie about the daughter of a strict reverend was not our thing."

"I won't ever complain about a Dumas film," I replied. "Kids, what are you doing tonight?"

"My friends and I are going to Water Tower Place to shop," Birgit said.

"We're having a sleepover at Amber's," Stephie said. "Some of Ashley's friends and some of my friends."

"My scout troop is going ice skating," Albert said.

"Steve, do you mind if I go with Kim, Nicki, Tessa, and Elsa to see *A Walk to Remember* instead?" Suzanne asked.

"Not at all! You don't need my permission!"

"No, but it is polite to ask, given our relationship."

"True. Are you going to stay out late?"

"No, I'll be home right after the movie so we can get to bed. I know you need to get up to walk Jessica to the hospital in the morning."

"I'll come with you and your wives, Steve," Natalie added.

"Kara-sama?" Yuriko asked. "May I join you at the movies?"

"Of course," Kara replied. "You're always welcome to join us if you wish."

"Steve, have you heard from Estrella?" Suzanne asked.

"She's coming back on Tuesday," I said. "Then on Friday, she's going to California to meet some friends of her family who are going to Disneyland. She'll be back the following Tuesday, and will likely be here until July, when her orientation begins and she can move into the dorms."

"She let me know that today," Birgit interjected.

"I was just going to ask that," I replied. "She only sent me an IM this afternoon."

We finished our meal, and then Birgit, Suzanne, and I did the dishes. The kids had left when we finished the dishes, so Kara, Jessica, Yuriko, and I set out for the movie theater, while Suzanne went to meet her friends.

---

 Birgit

"You're very pretty," a man who looked to be older than my dad said as we looked in the windows of the American Girl Shop.

"And you're older than my dad," I replied.

"An older guy is just what you need," he said. "I'll make it really good for you!"

"Give me a break! You're too old, too fat, and, worst of all, too rude! Walk away before you get arrested, hurt, or both!"

"You don't know what you're missing!" he said, touching my shoulder. "You'll love it!"

Well, he was going to be missing something, and he sure wasn't going to love it! I turned and delivered a full-strength front snap kick to his nuts, and he went down like a ton of bricks, groaning.

"Wow, Birgit!" Hannah exclaimed. "Don't you think that was a bit much!"

"No way!" Tiffany said. "Birgit was right to do that!"

"What happened?" a mall security officer asked, rushing over to us.

"This man was trying to get me to have sex with him," I said.

"She's lying," the man groaned, holding his hands over his balls.

"He was," Tiffany declared. "He's a pervert!"

"He told her 'an older guy is just what you need'," Julie confirmed. "Definitely a perv!"

The mall cop used his radio and two minutes later two actual Chicago police officers showed up, one female and one male. The mall cop told them what had happened.

"So why is the scumbag writhing on the ground?" the male cop asked.

The mall cop nodded to me.

"I kicked him in the nuts," I declared. "I'm only thirteen and he told me he wanted to have sex with me. I told him to go away but he kept asking and he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer!"

"She's telling the truth," Tiffany said.



They rolled the guy on his stomach and cuffed him.

"Where are your parents?" the female cop asked.

"At the movies," I replied.

"Here?"

"Yes. They're seeing *The Count of Monte Cristo*."

"Paul, you want to go up and get them?" the female cop asked.

"Let me use my cellphone," I said. "That way you don't have to stop the movie, or whatever."

"What's your name?" the female cop asked.

"Birgit Adams. My dad is Steve Adams and my mom is Kara Adams."

"Go ahead and call them," the female cop said.

"I want to press charges for assault," the man on the ground said through clenched teeth.

"You're free to file a report after you're booked," the male cop said.

He started reading the guy his rights while I sent dad a text, then called, which would tell him I needed him by the way the phone vibrated. Two minutes later he called.

"What's your emergency, Pumpkin?" he asked.

I explained about the guy, said the police were with me, and told Dad where I was. He said he'd get Mom and meet us in five minutes. I told the cop that, and we waited until Dad, Mom, Mom, Natalie, and Yuriko arrived. Dad spoke to the cop while Mom asked what had happened. I explained, and my other mom turned to the female police officer.

"Officer," Mom said, "I'm an ER doc from UofC. This man needs immediate medical attention. You're going to want to get him to an ER and have him checked, as he might be seriously injured."

"Can you examine him here?"

"Not for what I think might be wrong. This is too public for that kind of exam. I recommend calling the paramedics."

The cop conferred with her partner, and he used his radio to call for paramedics.

"What more do you need from us?" Dad asked.

"I have your daughter's statement and her friends' statements. I'll just need a way to contact you. I assume you have contact information for all these young ladies?"

"I have all their numbers in my phone," I said before Dad could answer.

"OK," the cop replied.

"Here's my business card," my dad said. "Work contact information is on the front, personal contact information is on the back."

"You hand out your personal information to your clients?" the cop asked.

"No," Dad replied. "I have two sets of cards. The main ones don't have any personal details and don't have my direct line. This one has everything."

"I assume you want to press charges?"

"Birgit?" Dad asked.

"Obviously! I'll testify, officer."

"So will we!" Tiffany and Julie declared.

"You and your daughter free to go, Mr. Adams. And her friends as well."

"Thank you," Dad said.

We moved away from where the cops were and waited until the paramedics arrived. Mom talked to them, and after they and the cops had taken him away, Mom and Dad took me aside.

"Are you OK?" Dad asked.

"Fine," I replied.

"What were you girls doing?" Mom asked.

"Window shopping and minding our own business," I replied. "Like I said before, the guy just came up and started talking to me. I'm sorry you had to miss the movie."

"It's OK," Dad said. "I'll leave it to you girls what to do."

"We were just about to go for ice cream, and then go home."

"As long as you're sure you're OK," Dad said.

"He didn't touch me except my shoulder, and he got what he deserved!"

"OK, Pumpkin," Dad said. "Go on."

"Sorry about the movie."

"It's OK," Dad said.

My friends and I headed for the ice cream shop, leaving Dad, my moms, Natalie, and Yuriko.

---

 Steve

"Are you sure that was a good idea?" Kara asked after the girls had left us.

"She didn't seem bothered in the least, nor did her friends. She may have overreacted a bit, but I don't think I can fault her."

"I'm not sure," Kara replied. "I mean about her not being bothered."

"We can deal with it at home, tomorrow. Letting her go now is my way of showing that she didn't do anything wrong. Making her go home, or whatever you might have in mind, basically punishes her for being a very pretty thirteen-year-old."

"How do you reconcile that with your thinking about teenage girls?"

"He **never** approaches them," Natalie said quickly. "That's the big difference. Steve never made ANY moves; I had to make them and ask him."

"That is exactly the difference," I said. "And we'd think nothing of a fifteen-year-old boy hitting on Birgit, so long as he didn't do anything she didn't want to do."

"All I ever wanted was to be a wife and mom," Kara complained, "and my kids won't let me be a mom!"

"You know my take on that," I replied. "It's the price for raising intelligent, independent kids who have quite a bit of autonomy. I think, at this point, Birgit needs a friend, more than a mom."

"Try having a son!" Jessica grouched. "He doesn't even want a friend! Mr. Future Navy Pilot has ZERO use for his mom."

"This is very strange," Yuriko said. "Children should be dutiful and respectful to their family."

"They are," I replied. "But it's a two-way street - I have to be respectful of them as well, and their duty to me is to be independent and successful. I'm sure you didn't always agree with your father."

"Of course not, but it was my duty to fulfill his wishes."

"And we can apply that here, too," I said. "My wish is that my children run their own lives to the extent they are able, so long as they are responsible for their choices. Kara doesn't disagree, she's just fighting the natural maternal urge."

"Which *men* do not have!" Kara huffed.

“That’s absolutely true,” I replied. “And why I believe kids need both a mom and a dad. That may not be politically correct to say, but it’s true. Even Josie, who would object to that statement out of hand, agrees that on some topics, Jesse needs his dad’s input. May I suggest a strategy?”

“Yes.”

“Spend some time with Birgit tomorrow, ask her how she feels and what she thinks, and just listen. Let her do most of the talking, and only ask questions to prompt her to keep talking.”

“That’s what you do when you cuddle, isn’t it?”

“Mostly, yes. I ask questions and listen. Birgit, like all our kids, is extremely intelligent and well-adjusted. Well, as well-adjusted as kids who have the three of us, Jennifer, Josie, and Elyse as parents could be! And usually, with those questions, she can work out the right thing to do, though she needs wisdom, which only comes with experience. Our kids have way more of that than most kids, but it’s still not enough. And it’s why our pint-size ruler of the universe makes so many missteps.”

“You’re not referring to tonight, are you?” Suzanne asked.

“No, but you are certainly aware of some of the things my precocious daughter has done.”

“The ‘F word’ incident?”

“Among others! Anyway, shall we go home and have a sauna? That way, we’ll be home when Birgit gets home, in case she needs us.”

“Fat chance of that!” Kara declared.

"She does need you, Honey, just on her own terms."

"I know," Kara sighed. "I just wish...no, never mind. You're right. I'll spend some time with her tomorrow. Let's head home."

---

 Birgit

"Birgit, what would you have done if the guy was hot, like your dad?" Tiffany asked.

I giggled, "He might have had a chance to get what he wanted."

He actually wouldn't have, but I couldn't tell my friends why.

"You're actually ready to have sex?" Missy asked.

"With the right guy? Probably. But I'm not just going to do it with some random guy for my first time."

"Missy, would you do it with Birgit's dad?" Tiffany asked.

"Uhm, he's hot, but he's way too old for me."

"Not me!" Tiffany declared. "I'd do it with him anytime he asked!"

"Shh!" I hissed. "Don't say stuff like that where other people can hear. You could get my dad in all kinds of trouble!"

"Sorry," Tiffany said. "But I do want an older guy for my first time, not some clueless boy my age who won't know what he's doing!"

"Jesse?" I asked with a smirk.

Tiffany giggled, "I don't think your brother is a typical teenage boy! I've seen all the hot girls who hang around with him!"

"I think we're too young," Julie said. "I mean, I can see fifteen, maybe, but I think seventeen or eighteen is right."

"For you," I said. "And that's fine. Each of us has to decide for ourselves."

"I'd do it with Jesse in a heartbeat!" Naomi declared. "But I don't think he'd be interested in me. I'm only fourteen and barely have boobs! The girls Jesse hangs out with all look like models!"

"So, just like a normal hockey player!" Tiffany declared.

"Or any athlete," Leslie declared. "Rachel is dating Javon and she's smoking hot!"

"Not to mention Jesse is a Sophomore, and Sophomores don't want anything to do with eighth graders!" Naomi complained.

"You'll be a Freshman next year," Laurie said.

"Still no chance," Naomi sighed. "Nobody in my family has nice boobs."

"That is the only thing guys our age notice," Laurie commiserated.

"Sad but true," Hannah agreed as we walked into the ice cream shop.

"Well, forget that!" Naomi declared. "Let's order our ice cream!"



---

 Steve

"You're welcome to join us, Yuriko," Kara said.

"You will be without clothes, right?"

"Yes, that's normal, but you can wear a towel, if you prefer."

"The only man would be Steve-sama, right?"

"Yes."

"Then it is no concern."

"We can put up the 'Privacy Please' sign to make sure nobody else comes in," Jessica offered.

"Thank you, Jessica-sama."

Fifteen minutes later, we were all sitting naked in the sauna which was quickly filling with steam from the copious water I'd poured onto the super-heated stones. We had a very relaxing time, and when we finished, we all showered, and then my wives went to bed.

Birgit arrived home and I spoke briefly with Hannah's parents, who had met them at the train to walk home. Both of them expressed a bit of concern over what had happened, but neither of them freaked out. I hoped that would be true for the rest of the parents as well.

After they left, Natalie and I walked Yuriko back to the dorms, and then I made tea and invited Natalie to join me in the 'Indian' room, as I was waiting for Suzanne to arrive home.

"Can I ask you about Kara's reaction?" Natalie inquired as we sipped our lemon tea.

"It's actually not Birgit who's the problem," I replied.

"Oh?"

"It started when Stephe and Ashley both decided they had less need for moms. I don't think Kara expected that, and it amplified the little war going on between Kara and Birgit because Kara was feeling...neglected, I guess is the word."

"Not by you, right?"

"I don't think so, but it also kind of coincides with Jessica's change of attitude towards our trio. I think Kara took that harder than she let on."

"It just seems out of character for her, at least from everything I've seen over the past five years."

"I think teenagers will do that to anyone!" I chuckled. "You told me how your dad changed once you hit puberty."

"True. And my mom, too, but it wasn't as stark as my dad's change. Before that, he was, well, protective, but not overly so. I got my period, and then suddenly he was asking a lot more questions about what I was doing and who I was with."

"And yet, he let you spend time with me in Russia."

Natalie laughed, "Except he had no idea I was sneaking into your room to talk to you! He'd have *never* let me be within twenty feet of you if he'd know about that!"

"As Katt's dad once said, there are some things a father does not need to know! Though he was WAY more open-minded than the typical American."

"So are you. You wouldn't have a problem with Birgit taking a much older lover the way I did."

"So long as it happens the way it happened with you, yes. A fifteen-year-old girl who approaches a guy in his thirties is not a problem in my book, though what happened tonight, is."

"Passive versus active?" Natalie asked.

"That's an interesting way to put it, and it does fit. I suspect you understand just how easy it would be for an older, experienced person to convince a younger, inexperienced person to engage in activities for which they weren't ready, right?"

Natalie nodded, "Yes. I've seen that happen. When we were Juniors in High School, one of my friends met a graduate student who basically got her so worked up that she had sex with him and seriously regretted it the next day. She didn't even date for two years after that. She finally started dating again last year. When I discussed it with her, it became even more clear why you didn't make any moves, and why you wouldn't have done a thing if I hadn't asked you to. And why you talk some girls to death first!"

"Especially teenagers," I replied.

"You never would have tried to sleep with me, would you?"

I shook my head, “No, I wouldn’t have. Certainly, I had those thoughts about the gorgeous nubile girl who was coming to my hotel room, but I wouldn’t have acted on it had you not made the first moves.”

“How do you think what happened tonight will affect Birgit and her friends?”

“That group of girls will be fine, because even the most conservative of their parents have a much healthier view about teens than the average member of society. If they didn’t, they’d never let their girls be part of the Girl Gang. So, I think, they’ll all use it as a lesson about being careful, and it’ll actually reinforce their belief that the girls should all stick together. Safety in numbers, as it were.”

“You don’t think some of the parents might try to keep their daughters from going to the Loop or Michigan Avenue?”

“It’s possible, but you know the statistics, right?”

“That the vast majority of cases of sexual abuse are family, close family friends, or acquaintances. And the vast majority of kidnappings are custody disputes.”

“Of the tens of thousands of cases of ‘kidnapping’ reported last year, something like six were not related to a custody dispute. It’s like the statistics for rape, especially when you take into account the unreported rapes. The chances that any woman would be raped by a total stranger are very, very low. That’s not to say it doesn’t happen, but the statistics don’t lie.”

“I don’t think any parent I know other than you bases their decisions on statistics!”

I chuckled, “I don’t, but they are handy to defend my points against claims that the girls are at extreme risk in Water Tower Place, to name one example. There’s

FAR more risk of 'date rape' when they start dating than there is of what happened with the jackass they ran into tonight."

"If we're talking the Girl Gang, I think it's the *boys* who are at risk!" Natalie teased.

"Yeah, but knowing teenage boys, I don't think any of them would feel abused!"

Natalie smirked, "About as much as Mikey feels 'abused' by my sister!"

"Hi!" Suzanne said from the door to the 'Indian' room.

"Hi," I replied. "I was waiting for you."

"Then I'm going to bed," Natalie said. "See you both in the morning."

"Good night," I replied.

She got a 'good night' kiss from me and a hug from Suzanne, then headed to the bedroom off the kitchen.

"Did you enjoy the movie?" she asked.

"We only saw about half of it. There was an incident with Birgit and the girls we had to deal with."

"What did they do now?" Suzanne asked lightly.

"Birgit responded to a guy older than me asking her to have sex with him by kicking him in the balls."

"Uh-oh."

“Basically, the guy came up to the girls, told Birgit she was pretty, and that he wanted sex. She told him ‘no’, but he persisted, telling her how great he could make her feel. She told him to get lost, and when he asked the third time, and touched her shoulder, she executed a perfect karate kick to his groin. Mall security saw it, called the cops, who arrested the guy, and had Birgit call us.”

“Sounds well-deserved. How badly was he hurt?”

“Jess insisted they call the paramedics because he could very well have a ruptured testicle or another injury.”

“Serves him right!”

“You sound like Stephanie when she took on the three gang-bangers, one of whom likely never banged again!”

“His injury was that severe?”

“An orchiectomy, at least. The urologist wasn’t sure if he’d be able to get or sustain an erection due to the trauma.”

“Damn.”

“Don’t mess with the Adams girls!”

“You can mess with me! I promise only tender-loving treatment of that part of your anatomy!”

“Shall we go upstairs?” I asked.

“Before we go, I have a question for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Elsa and Nickie are here and want to spend the night.”

“I can sleep with Natalie,” I offered.

Suzanne laughed, “With you and me, you dope!”

# V. Visitors

**January 25, 2002, Chicago, Illinois**

 Steve

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I said, "Was this your idea?"

Suzanne shook her head, "No. The five of us were joking and teasing, and Tessa jokingly suggested the five of us try to completely wear you out. That led to a silly discussion of what we'd do, though I pointed out that both Tessa and Kim were dating seriously enough that it would violate your rules for them to be with you. Tessa acknowledged that and challenged the three of us."

I chuckled, "I thought it was only guys who fell for the 'double dog dare' challenges!"

"You do realize that girls' locker rooms are at least as bad as guys', right?"

"So I've been told. Despite having the lifelong ambition of being in a girls' locker room, it's never happened!"

"Of all men, YOU would be the one to be able to pull that off, not only not being arrested, but getting laid!"

"Perhaps," I grinned. "But it's never been worth the risk of finding out."

"It doesn't hurt that you have access to more pussy than any man I know!"

"No, it doesn't." I grinned. "But how does this fit within my revised attitude?"



“Well, first of all, you’ve been with both of them before, which means it conforms to your limited times with new girls; second, you set up a regular thing with Maya; third, you were with that girl in Boca; and fourth, you haven’t had an actual foursome in a long, long time! It will be fun.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That all I could do was ask, and that there was a very good chance you’d say ‘no’.”

“I’m curious, and you know this has no direct bearing on my decision, but how involved?”

“Probably just some kissing with each other, nothing more. You know I’m OK if it goes further than that.”

“Back in November, when I used innuendo to suggest a threesome, Elsa’s response was ‘in your dreams’. What changed?”

“I don’t know that anything changed, really. If you’re worried about her thinking it through, the silly conversation was before the movie, so she had plenty of time to think about it and back out.”

“Peer pressure can be pretty strong,” I replied.

“If that is your objection, you should have raised it in Saint Martin!”

“Point taken, ” I replied. “And Nickie?”

“Is the one I’m sure would want to kiss me!”

“On a scale of one to ten, how much do you want to do this?”

“Is that important?”

“Yes. And I mean for you, not for me.”

“I’m not sure I can separate those at this point,” Suzanne said. “I have to consider our relationship in everything I do, the same as you do with me. And the same as you do with Kara and Jessica, and they do with you and each other.”

“A valid point,” I replied. “And you took that into account before suggesting it?”

“Not specifically, but what I’m suggesting doesn’t violate your agreement with your wives, doesn’t violate your New Year’s resolution, doesn’t violate any of your rules, and would be lots of fun.”

“How much would it bother you if I declined?”

“I love you, Steve. If you don’t want to do it, just say so. The girls will go back to their dorms and I’ll have you in my bed.”

“Do you know my real concern?” I asked.

Suzanne was quiet for a moment, “That I’m procuring for you. But that’s not what this is. It wasn’t even that when we went to Saint Martin. If you want to be completely accurate, I was procuring for the girls, not for you!”

“And now?”

“I’d call it spontaneous, actually. I don’t think anyone planned this, we just kind of joked and teased our way into it. And it was actually Tessa’s silly comment that started the whole thing, and she’s not participating.”

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"I'm inclined to say 'no', at least not tonight. If it's something you really want to do, for you, then we can discuss it further."

"May I ask why not tonight?"

"Mostly because I want more time to consider if it fits with what I meant when I made my resolution. From a practical point of view, I have to be up early in the morning to walk Jess to work, and I need my sleep, as you know. Add in what happened with Birgit tonight, and I think, if this is going to happen, it shouldn't be tonight. As I said, we can discuss it, and plan it, if we decide to do it."

"I need to let the girls know."

"OK. We should walk them back to the dorms."

"Or they can sleep in the other bed in my room."

"Then you and I will just sleep," I replied.

"I believe you've reminded me that sex isn't just for bed and just at night! We'll have other opportunities this weekend!"

"Then let's go to bed."



## **January 26, 2002, Chicago, Illinois**

"Suzanne, Elsa, and Nickie proposed a foursome last night," I said after Kara, Jessica, and I left the house on Saturday morning.

"And?" Kara asked.

"I said 'no', at least for now. I'm not sure it fits with my 'new era thinking'."

"You've been with all of them before," Kara said.

"Yes, and that particular exception could apply to literally scores of girls, which is not what I intended. When I made that exception, it was basically for Katy and a few others, but very limited, not the entire list of nearly two hundred girls. And I did leave things open for occasional new girls, and Wendy Cobb is one of those.

"I suppose the short answer is I have you two, Suzanne, Natalie, and, for a short time, Hope. And you know where that might lead. There's also Kristin in the offing, should that happen. And you both know there will be others from time to time. I suppose one way to say it is that I got it out of my system in November and December."

"I'm not trying to encourage you," Kara said, "just trying to understand your thinking."

"You aren't upset with Suzanne, are you?" Jessica asked.

"Not at all," I replied. "It is a tempting offer, and one I could see myself doing, but I also know myself well enough that it would be easy to let things get crazy, give all the opportunities which seem to present themselves. Heck, the cheerleaders were interested in repeats, and several of them offered to introduce me to friends! It could be like High School all over again if I let it! Honestly, I feel like it's time to settle down, so to speak. We have a stable situation with the three of us and Suzanne, and I don't want to mess that up in any way."

"Was she upset?" Kara asked.

“Not at all. She might ask again, and I’ll consider the request if and when she does.”

“Invite her to sleep with us tonight,” Jessica requested.

“OK.”

“Speaking of requests,” Kara asked, “will you fulfill Hope’s, if she makes it?”

“She spoke to you, right?”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure she’ll ask. I think that her curiosity has got the best of her, so to speak, and having you with her will allow her to tell herself that it was just an experiment. I think she just *has* to know, and I don’t think it’ll harm her in any way.”

“Has to?”

“She sees Jessica and me and wonders,” Kara replied. “And the three of us know that doing something is very different from talking about it. Not to mention her desire to offend her grandfather as much as possible.”

“OK. That gives me a pretty clear idea of what to do - say ‘yes’ and be there to support her, assuming Kailey is interested enough in guys to do it.”

When we reached the hospital, Kara and I both kissed Jessica, and after she had gone into the ER, we turned for home.

“I’ll have my chat with Birgit while you’re at breakfast with the men,” Kara said.

“She’s really a good kid,” I said. “She just thinks she needs more space than she believes you’re willing to give. I’ve pointed out to her that she’s not nearly as mature as she thinks she is, though I’d recommend you not say something like that to her.”

“I feel as if I’ve done something wrong, because she’s OK with you saying those kinds of things.”

“You haven’t, Honey” I replied. “And one day soon, I’m going to be on her shit list.”

“She’ll get over that pretty quickly.”

“Yes, and THAT is when she’ll stop competing with you, because she can’t win. Right now, she thinks she can gain the upper hand, but it’s illusory. I’d confront her now, but I don’t think that’s a good idea. She has to come to me, and I have to rebuff her, and she has to believe that I’m the one who is saying ‘no’, not you or Jess.”

“She’ll blame us.”

“It’s on me to make sure that does not happen. Ultimately, your opinions don’t matter because I wouldn’t do it, even if you both gave your blessing. Not after what happened with my sister.”

“May I say something about that? I know it’s generally off-limits.”

“Off-limits only because we’ve put the whole thing behind us.”

“Had your sister not wanted to marry you and have your children, it might actually have turned out OK. In the end, what messed her up was the

expectation that somehow you two could have what amounted to a marriage. And THAT is Birgit's desire as well."

"So if she just wanted an expert deflowering and to fuck a few times, THEN it would be OK?" I asked.

Kara laughed, "I didn't say that! I want to say something which I know Jess would disagree with, so can we keep this conversation between you and me?"

"Sure."

"My thinking has evolved and I believe you and Stephanie mutually consented, and without her expectation of a life-long relationship, would have been the beautiful thing you thought it was, and I don't have a problem with that."

"You're OK with incest?"

"No, I said I don't have a problem with it. It's a nuance, similar to your thinking about acquiescence and consent. Obviously, in the case of you and Stephanie, you couldn't consent to what she truly wanted, so you agreed to be with her on your terms, but didn't foreclose what she wanted firmly. Had you talked about, set boundaries and limits, and had she understood it was for a limited time, it wouldn't have ended in disaster. I'm not blaming you, by the way, because you were both teenagers without the wisdom we have now."

"Interesting. I see your point, and it makes some sense, but it doesn't change anything about Birgit."

"Nor should it," Kara affirmed. "It would be the same catastrophic result, and probably worse."

"Do you have any limits?" I asked.

“No man will ever touch me the way you, nor any woman the way Jessica does. Beyond that, no. You know I’m a voyeur and an exhibitionist, and I get off on watching you deflower girls, but I understand the limits there. As for what other people do, including you, it’s up to them. Our only actual limit is that our physical sexual activity is exclusive to our trio, though voyeurism and exhibitionism are OK.”

“Where would you draw the line?”

“Between consenting partners? I wouldn’t. And, in the end, you wouldn’t either. To use Birgit as an example, you can’t consent to what she wants, so it can’t happen, even IF you didn’t have the history with your sister.”

“May I have your honest opinion on my ‘new era thinking’?”

“If you’re happy, I’m happy. I mean that.”

“Would you change anything?” I asked.

Kara laughed, “You know what really turns me on, so if you ever decide it’s OK for me to bring you virgins to deflower while I watch, and then have you fuck my brains out in front of them, I won’t object! And you know Jess is OK with my sexual expression. She’s OK with fooling around in front of Suzanne, or watching you and Suzanne, but she doesn’t get excited the way I do.”

“Is that what you want?” I asked.

“I don’t want you to do something that goes against who you want to be.”

“Who I want to be is your husband, and Jessica’s husband. I’d give up *everyone* else for you two.”



“Suzanne?”

“If I were forced to choose, I’d choose you and Jessica. Period. But I can’t see that choice ever being forced by either of you.”

“And Elyse? Didn’t you promise her you would never say ‘no’?”

“I did, and of all the people who would understand, it would be her, and she’d release me from my promise. So would Suzanne, for that matter. Going back to your desires, if you want to do that on occasion, then I will. For you. Because I love you. But they would have to be at least seventeen. I can’t make exceptions to the age rule for what you want.”

“You’re sure that’s what you want to do?”

“Positive.”

“I love you, Snuggle Bear! I promise not to be outrageous or too demanding!”

“Just one at a time, too, please.”

“I won’t go crazy; I promise. And it’s not like finding girls who are willing to do that will be easy.”

“I know you’ll find them,” I chuckled. “You’re highly motivated!”

“Now, if I could just get you to agree to make Abbie’s movie!”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Bummer!”

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 Birgit

“Are you doing OK?” Dad asked when I climbed into the chaise after he walked Mom to the hospital.

“Yes,” I replied. “He didn’t scare me, he was being dumb. But I told him to stop, twice, and he wouldn’t.”

“Did you consider walking away?” Dad asked.

“No,” I admitted. “Sensei Jim is going to be upset.”

“That’s between you and him,” Dad replied. “You do need to tell him because you used your karate outside the dojo and not in a competition.”

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“Being an adult means accepting responsibility for your actions. And being able to discuss what you did and why you did it. Your mom is going to speak to you later this morning.”

“Not again!” I complained.

“Birgit Adams! You do NOT whine!”

“Sorry, Dad,” I said. “But everything is fine!”

“Then explain that to your mom the way a mature young woman would. If you treat her as the enemy, the only thing she’ll ever be is an enemy. And she’s not,

Pumpkin. She loves you and cares about you, and is looking out for you the way I do."

"Not even!" I protested. "You just ask me about stuff and let me handle it my way, and guide me when you think I'm wrong."

"Because you actually talk to me," Dad said. "You don't talk to your mom."

"She doesn't understand!" I protested.

"She understands far more than you think. Believe it or not, your mom and I were both teenagers, with our own struggles, and our own conflicts with our parents. We understand."

"You do," I admitted.

"And so long as you are convinced that your mom doesn't understand, the conflict will continue and get worse. Only you can fix this, Pumpkin. I want you to fix it. If you don't, I'll be very unhappy and very disappointed."

"It's not that easy!"

"Yes, actually, it is," Dad said firmly. "You can fix it anytime you want."

"But it's so easy to talk to you! It's different!"

"Why?" Dad asked.

"Because you don't judge me!"

"You think your mom is judging you?"

“And controlling!”

“Oh give me a break!” Dad exclaimed, sounding upset. “That is pure BS and you know it, young lady! You’re just TRYING to piss her off and I won’t stand for it!”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Sorry that you said it? Or sorry that you thought it? Be honest, please.”

“Sorry that I said it,” I replied grudgingly.

“Tell me what’s bothering you, please?”

I couldn’t, because right now, if I told him, he’d say ‘no’ because he was upset with me. But I knew if I didn’t say *something*, he’d continue to be upset.

“Katy thinks it’s hormones,” I said. “She says it’s part of adolescence, and it makes girls crazy and turns boys into sex fiends!”

Dad laughed, which was a good sign.

“That does sound like Katy!” he said. “And I accept that’s a large part of the problem, but you need to find a way to deal with it so that it doesn’t turn you into a bitch.”

“Dad!” I protested, feeling like I was going to start crying.

“I didn’t say you were one, but you could turn into one if you don’t find a way to manage your emotions. If you don’t, you could turn into an adult like the ones you detest so much.”

“Why are you saying these things?” I asked as tears ran down my face.

“Because I love you, Pumpkin, and I want to see you be the wonderful young woman I know you can be. And that starts with fixing things with your mom.”

“I’ll try,” I said, sobbing softly.

“Good,” Dad said.

“Cuddle me until you have to leave?”

“Yes, but go get some tissues and blow your nose and wipe your cheeks, please.”

I reluctantly got up from the chaise, took some tissues from the box and blew my nose, wiped my cheeks, and dabbed my eyes. I tossed the tissue in the small trashcan, then got back in the chaise with Dad and snuggled close.

“I’m really sorry, Dad.”

“This time I believe you,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied quietly. “Do you still love me?”

“Always! You should never, ever doubt that.”

“I was afraid you might hate me,” I said.

“There’s no chance of that,” Dad soothed, squeezing his arms tightly around me.

“I might be disappointed, though.”

“Same thing,” I said.

“It’s not, but I understand what you mean.”

We cuddled until Dad had to leave for his breakfast with the men. I had breakfast with my mom, Suzanne, Natalie, and my siblings, and while Ashley and Albert washed dishes, Mom asked to go to the 'Indian' room. She closed the door and we sat side-by-side in two basket chairs.

"Tell me about last night, please," Mom said.

"We were looking in the windows of The American Girl, and were about to go in, when this guy came up next to me. He told me I was very pretty and I told him he was older than Dad. I wasn't rude or anything, I just said it in a normal voice. He said that an older guy was just what I need, which isn't wrong."

Mom laughed, "I'm not surprised you believe that."

I remembered what Dad had said, and decided I could change things with Mom by talking to her the way I talked to Dad.

"So you'd be OK if I went to Uncle Kurt?" I asked with a smirk. "Trading daughters for deflowering?"

"You little...so and so!" Mom exclaimed, as Dad laughed hard. "I don't think Kathy would be very happy, because Kurt does NOT have the freedom your dad has!"

"I'll have to think about how Aunt Kathy might react and then decide," I said primly, the way I often heard Mom respond to Dad. "Anyway, the jerk said I needed an older guy and he would make it really good for me. I said 'Give me a break!' and told him he was too old, too fat, and worst of all, too rude. I told him to walk away before he got arrested, got hurt, or both. He said I didn't know what I was missing and touched my shoulder. That's when I turned and kicked him hard in the groin."

“Why?”

“Because he touched me! If he hadn’t put his hand on my shoulder, I wouldn’t have kicked him. But at that point, he violated my personal space and deserved what he got! A kick in the nuts!”

“You realize that at some point, very soon, some detectives are going to want to talk to you.”

“Why? I told the police officers what happened!”

“Because that’s how the system works. In fact, they’ll probably call your dad sometime today to arrange it.”

“Can I have a lawyer with me?” I asked.

“Why would you need a lawyer?”

“Are you kidding?” I asked. “You do know my dad, right?”

“Intimately!” Mom replied.

“Well, he would NEVER talk to a detective or a government agent without a mouthpiece, no matter what. Me, too.”

“So how do you feel?”

“Fine. Nothing bad happened. Well, you know what I mean. He didn’t hurt me or touch me except my shoulder.”

“Was this different from Vermont?”

“The German kid never touched me, while this guy did. Mom, I’m fine, I promise. And I’m sorry about how I reacted when you came out to Vermont. I know you were concerned. And I know you were annoyed with the way I behaved. I’m sorry, Mom.”

“And I’m sorry, too. It was never my intent to annoy you.”

“Dad suggested we talk more, like this,” I said.

“Your dad is pretty smart,” Mom replied with a smile.

“He is. Well, when he’s not being a ‘dumb boy’! I’ll try harder to not have a bad attitude.”

“And I’ll do my best to not annoy you, but I think it’s going to happen.”

“Even Dad annoys me,” I said with a smirk.

“Have you told him?” Mom asked.

“He knows,” I replied.

“Would you like to bake cookies the way we used to?”

“Yes,” I replied.

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 Jesse

“You were awesome in goal!” Macrina exclaimed when I came out of the locker room after our 2–1 victory over Lane Tech.



“Thanks!”

“Where’s your dad?”

“He has to teach karate and we agreed he would skip that only for playoff games. Plus, he suspects he’s going to have to talk to the police today.”

“The police? Why?”

“Birgit and her friends were at Water Tower Place and a fat guy who is older than my dad came up to her, asked her to have sex with him, and touched her shoulder. She kicked him in the nuts.”

“Older than your dad? Gross! And she’s thirteen, right?”

“Yes.”

“Double gross! Your dad is good looking, but that would still be gross! So what happened?”

“The cops took the guy away, and as I said, they’ll probably want to talk to him and Birgit. She’s fine.”

We had borrowed Kara’s minivan because Libby and Karli had wanted to come along, and Macrina was coming home with us. I’d asked Aunt Kara if it was OK to drive, and she’d said yes, so I got into the driver’s seat and Mom Two got into the passenger seat, because I had to have a licensed driver over eighteen sitting next to me.

“Does Kara keep crash helmets in her van?” Mom Two asked.

"You're so funny," I said. "Not! But you could wear my goalie helmet, if you wanted."

"Oh, right! Mom Two said, shaking her head, "I'm going to put that smelly, sweaty thing on MY head! Yuck!"

"Then you'll just have to take your chances! I could say a prayer for you, if you wanted."

"I'd rather have the hockey helmet!"

"Suit yourself!" I grinned.

I started the minivan, backed out of the parking spot, put the van in 'Drive', and headed for the exit. Twenty minutes later I pulled into the driveway without any incidents along the way.

"Going to kiss the driveway?" I teased Mom Two.

"You did a good job, Jesse," Mom One said.

"You are NO help, Jen!" Mom Two grouched.

I laughed, got out of the van, got my gear, and Macrina, Libby, Karli, and I went into the house and to the basement so I could put my gear on the racks. When I had everything set, I turned on the fan and dehumidifier, and then the four of us went upstairs to have an early lunch. After we ate, Libby and Karli left, and I spent three hours poking Macrina with my big stick.

My mobile phone rang just as I was getting into my car after breakfast at Bucktown Bistro. The Caller ID display showed 'Private' which I was fairly sure meant the call I was expecting from a detective.

"Steve Adams," I said after I flipped the phone open to answer the call.

"Detective Sargent Will Gannon."

I couldn't help but laugh, "And your partner is named 'Friday'?"

"Like I haven't heard THAT for my entire time on the force."

"Sorry, but I was a big fan of *Dragnet*, *Adam-12*, and *Emergency*, back in the day."

"My parents, too. I was born in 1968 to an LA cop named Frank Gannon. He and my mom, Mary, thought it was a great idea. They called me 'Bill' but I decided to use Will."

"I got the *Addams Family* jokes when I was in grade school. I assume you're calling about last night's incident at Water Tower Place?"

"Yes. I have security videos and the statements your daughter and her friends made to the uniformed officers, as well as a report from the rent-a-cop who witnessed the situation. Do you have time today when I can speak with you and your daughter? I'd like to get something to the State's Attorney today so we can keep the dirtbag locked up."

"I'm free most of the afternoon," I replied. "I'm on my way to the dojo to teach karate."

"You're an instructor?"

“Yes. My daughter is a student.”

“I could see that from the perfectly executed kick. I’m a 1st Dan black belt in Taekwondo. What form?”

“Shōtōkan. I’m 6th Dan and Birgit is 1st Kyu. I believe you would call it 1st Geup.”

“Yes. We use red belts, though, not brown, for our candidates for promotion to Dan. 6th Dan is damned impressive.”

“Thanks. What time works for you?”

“How about 3:00pm. I can come to your house, if that’s OK.”

“It is. You have the address, right?”

“Yes. The uniformed officer gave me the card you provided. See you at 3:00pm.”

“Just you? Or a partner?”

“My partner is interviewing the rent-a-cop and a pair of witnesses. Will you be able to provide contact information for the other girls?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll see you at 3:00pm.”

He disconnected the call and I hit the red ‘End Call’ button, then pressed the speed-dial button for Birgit.

 Birgit

“Hi, Dad! Mom and I are making cookies!”

“You had a successful talk?”

“Yes.”

“Good. A police detective will be at the house at 3:00pm to interview you.”

“I want a lawyer!” I exclaimed.

Dad laughed, “You’re not being investigated, Pumpkin!”

“So? You said to NEVER talk to the police or government agents without an attorney! I want one!”

“I’ll call Melanie,” Dad offered.

“I want Trish. I can call her. I already have her on retainer!”

Dad laughed, “From the time you talked to her about Fatimah?”

“Yes. I know she’s not a criminal lawyer, like Melanie, but I’m not being investigated.”

“I’ll let Mel know you called her a ‘criminal lawyer’!”

“Isn’t that redundant?” I asked, giggling.

“Just remember, all those ‘criminal lawyers’ put food on the table and clothes on your back!”

“And all the ‘quack doctors’, too!”

“You’re in a much better mood, Pumpkin.”

“Midol,” I replied, which was half true.

The other half was I knew that I had to fix things with Dad, because having him disappointed in me was the worst thing I could think of, short of something really bad happening to him, which I didn’t even want to think about!

“I’ll be home in thirty minutes, then we’ll go to karate. Call Trish, and then let me know if there’s a problem.”

“Will do! Love you, Dad!”

“Love you, too, Pumpkin.”

I hung up just as the timer rang to let us know a batch of cookies was finished baking.

“I take it a detective is coming here?” Mom said as I carefully used a hot pad to remove the tray of cookies from the oven.

“Yes. I need to call Trish, because I want her here.”

I put in the last tray, then went to Dad’s study to call Trish. She didn’t answer her home number, so I checked Dad’s Rolodex again and dialed her mobile number.

“Hi, Steve!” Trish said when she answered.

"It's actually Birgit, calling from my Dad's study."

"What did you do now?" Trish asked, obviously teasing.

"Kicked an old fat guy in the balls for asking me to have sex with him, but I'm not in trouble, he is! He was arrested for touching my shoulder and asking me to have sex with him. A detective is coming to talk to me and I want a mouthpiece!"

Trish laughed, "I'm not a defense attorney, but I think I can sit with you while you give your statement. When?"

"3:00pm at the house."

"I'll be there by 2:30pm. We'll bring Jorge Louis, too."

"Great! See you!"

"See you!"

I hung up and went back to the kitchen to finish making cookies. I let Mom know that Trish would be at the house when the detective arrived.

"You might want to wait to speak to Sensei Jim until after you speak to the detective," Mom advised.

"Why?"

"Just to be safe. You can let Sensei Jim know on Monday."

"Safe?"

“You did kick a man in his groin, which could be considered battery. I’ve seen it before where the police actually consider the attacker’s claims.”

“You mean because he said he wanted to press charges?”

“Yes. You have all the witnesses, but the police might ask questions to see if you really had a good reason to do what you did.”

*“Yes, Your Honor, honest, I was minding my own business when a thirteen-year-old girl who is a foot shorter and weighs a third of what I do beat me up!”*

Mom laughed, “I understand how silly it sounds, but the police did what I said with Michelle when she defended herself from a guy who was trying to rape her.”

“I remember that,” I said. “But I have witnesses!”

“And yet, you want your lawyer with you!”

“True,” I admitted. “I don’t trust the government, especially law enforcement.”

“You do take after your dad that way.”

“All the kids do, except for Albert. He’s bought into the whole program!”

Mom laughed, “Not quite as much as you think. He just keeps his goal in mind, and knows what he has to do to get it.”

We finished baking cookies just before Dad arrived home, then all of us went to karate.



 Steve

“How was your week?” I asked Hope when she arrived for lunch.

“I’m pretty much in the groove with all my classes, and everything else is going great! I want to bring Kailey to Philosophy Club tomorrow, if it’s OK.”

“It is.”

“I want her to meet you before I take the next step.”

“Which is? I mean, if I may ask?”

“A kiss. I want to see how it makes me feel.”

“I’m pretty sure you know.”

Hope smiled, “I have a really strong suspicion, but I’m being cautious, as you advised.”

“A good plan. Does Kailey know enough about my household to not be overwhelmed?”

“I’ve told her about your family, including about Jennifer and Elyse. Minimal details, of course, but she knows enough that she won’t be overwhelmed.”

“Sounds good.”

My phone rang, interrupting us. I saw ‘Sweden’ in the display and let Hope know I needed to take the call.

“Hi, Steve! It’s Karin!” Karin Andersson exclaimed after I answered the phone.

“Hi, Karin! What’s up?”

“What are you doing the second week in February?”

“We leave for Vermont on Friday, the 15th. Why?”

“We decided to come to the States for «sportlov». I can book really inexpensive tickets. We’d fly in on the 9th and fly home on the 16th. I’m sure Sofia and Costas will be happy to entertain us on Friday night.”

“You know you’re always welcome! Just the three of you?”

“Yes. Katt and her family are going skiing in Austria. Sound familiar?”

“It does! I suppose we’ll see you on the 9th!”

“Great! See you then!”

We said ‘goodbye’ and hung up.

“Visitors?” Hope asked.

“Yes. Kristian, Karin, and Kjell. That should make Birgit’s day.”

Hope laughed, “She’s about that age, isn’t she?”

“She is.”

“Anyway, I wonder if you can help me with something else?”

“What’s that?”

“A friend of mine from back home applied to UofC, but her parents are afraid of her coming to Chicago. I thought maybe you could speak with them.”

“I’d be happy to do it,” I replied, “but it might be better if Kara was the one to talk to them. I suspect, given it’s their daughter, that they would be more likely to listen to a woman who grew up in Milford and moved to Chicago.”

“That makes sense.”

“Do you know what she wants to study?”

“She hasn’t decided, but some kind of science.”

“Then Kara is absolutely the right choice. Is this a girl from church?”

“No. She lived down the street from us through ninth grade, then moved to another house in Milford. But we still saw each other at school and could occasionally get together.”

“I take it not everyone at the Christian school you attended was as fanatical as your grandfather?”

Hope laughed, “Not even close! There were kids who went to beer parties, danced, and fooled around. A minority, for sure, but there were kids who behaved like normal teenagers there.”

“Have a word with Kara.”

“I will. OK to use your PC to work on my assignment?”

“Always. I have a few things to do before the police detective arrives.”

“Police detective?”

I explained what had happened with Birgit, then left Hope to work on her assignment while I went to the sunroom to spend time with Kara, Suzanne, and my daughters.

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 Birgit

“Tell me everything that happened,” Trish said when we sat down in the kitchen with Mom and Dad. “Starting from when you left home.”

I told her the story, starting with leaving the house and taking the train into the city, then taking the L so we could get to Water Tower Place.

“Just you and your friends? No adults?” Trish asked.

“Not in the city. Tiffany’s parents walked with us to the train, and later Hannah’s parents met us and walked us home.”

“OK, continue, please,” Trish instructed.

I told her about the stores we’d gone into, and how we ended up looking in the window of the American Girl store, and were just about to go in, when the old, fat guy came up next to us and started hitting on me.

“When he touched your shoulder, how did he do it?” Trish asked.

“He was trying to put his hand there, but as soon as I felt his fingers, I turned and kicked him. I mean, for all I knew, he was trying to cop a feel of my boobs.”

That last part had been something Rachel had suggested I say when I spoke to her earlier in the day.

“So you felt threatened?”

“Kind of, I guess. I mean, it was obvious what he wanted, but we were in Water Tower Place and there were lots of people around. I obviously didn’t want him to touch me, and I absolutely wasn’t interested in having sex with him, but I didn’t feel scared, just outraged.”

“I think the word you should use with the police is ‘offended’ or better yet, say that he was ‘creepy,’” Trish advised. “They are not going to understand your views on sexuality.”

I rolled my eyes, “Along with the rest of the country except Dad’s and Mom’s friends!”

“Birgit, you need to think about how a typical thirteen-year-old would feel, and explain it that way to the detectives.”

“Is there a risk of him actually filing a complaint?” Mom asked.

“There’s always a risk, but given Birgit is a minor, and well under the age of consent, I can’t imagine that going anywhere. Melanie or one of the other criminal defense attorneys would have a better grasp of the situation, but no prosecutor would dare charge a thirteen-year-old girl who had a credible claim to being sexually assaulted.”

“Oh, give me a break! He touched my shoulder! That makes him a jerk, not a rapist!”

“As I said, you need to look at this from the perspective of a typical thirteen-year-old girl.”

“I will,” I replied. “But it’s just dumb. Honestly, I think he already got what he deserved and I bet he doesn’t try it again!”

“I’d suggest not saying that to the police.”

“Am I going to have to testify in court?” I asked.

“I’d say, given what you’ve told me, most likely not. If they have the security camera footage, and statements from other witnesses, including your friends, I’d wager that he pleads guilty to a misdemeanor attempt, though to which offense, I’m not sure. Again, that would be a question for Melanie or another criminal defense lawyer.”

“Is there anything you haven’t told us, Pumpkin?” Dad asked.

“No. What I said is exactly how it happened.”

Dad refilled everyone’s teacups and a few minutes later, the doorbell rang. Dad went to answer it and returned with a tall, good-looking black detective who introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Will Gannon.

“No way!” Mom exclaimed. “Sorry.”

The detective smiled, “It’s OK. Everyone of a certain age has that same reaction. Your husband did. But it’s not just me. When I joined the Navy in 1986, the medical officer who did my initial physical was named Doctor McCoy, and I served with a Chief Scott.”

“How long did you serve?” Mom asked.

“Four years. I joined the force right out of the service.”

“Detective,” Dad said, “this Birgit’s mom, Kara, and Birgit’s attorney, Patricia Fitzpatrick.”

“Attorney?” the detective asked, sounding surprised.

“Dad says never speak to the police without an attorney present,” I said. “I know I’m not in trouble.”

“I’ve had more than my share of negative interactions with the government,” Dad said. “But every single one of them was resolved in my favor. If you pulled my ‘sheet’, which I’m sure you did, you’ll know a tiny fraction of it, as most of it had to do with the FBI over the fact that I had close friends who were Russians during the Soviet era. And we have close Muslim friends now.”

“That would do it,” he confirmed.

“Have a seat and Birgit will answer any questions you ask.”